

# VARIANT

ISSUE 11 SPRING 1992 UK £3.50 US\$10

CAN \$10.95 IR £4.00

**TV FIGHTERS:** *Big star  
in a wee picture  
Despite TV  
David Hall*

*The curtain rises in Eastern Europe*

*Video in Slovenia*

*Virtual Real Estate*

*Computer Art*

*European Media Art Festivals Reviewed*

*Improvisation: Derek Bailey interviewed*

*Cyberpunk: Stelarc interviewed*

**Reviews:** Comics/Tina Modotti/Live Art Handbook  
Felix, Mediamatic/Ear/ReR Quarterley/E.S.T/Ten8/Sean Taylor  
Annette Messenger / Damien Hirst



Variant is a magazine of cross-currents in culture: art practice, media, critical ideas, imaginative and independent tendencies. We are a charitable project and publish four times a year with the assistance of grants, advertising and sales. Most items are commissioned, but we welcome contributions and ideas for news items, reviews, articles, interviews, and polemical writing. Guidelines for writers are available. We also welcome ideas for artists pages and for items which we can distribute within the magazine, such as stickers, prints, xerox work and other ephemera.

Deadline for issue 12 is  
May 15th (Contributions)  
May 29th (Advertising)

To advertise call 041 221 6380.  
Rates for B & W and colour available.

Subscriptions are £14 for four issues (individuals) £20 for four issues (institutions)

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Thanks also to: Ken Gill, Euan Sutherland, Doug Aubrey, Billy Clark, Craig Richardson, Alan Robertson, and Steve Partridge for their uncredited contributions.

Opinions expressed in Variant are those of writers and not necessarily those of the editor or of Variant.

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Printed by: Windrush Press, Witney, (0993) 772197

Typesetting by: Kerry Press, Luton.

Distribution: Variant

Central Books (081 986 4845)

AK Distribution (031 667 1507)

Counter Distribution (071 274 9009)

Distributed in the UK by Bernhard De Boer (667 9300)

Canada by Marginal (705 745 2326)

*Subsidised by the Scottish Arts Council*

"What we do is to recognise that a culture does not die. Under such conditions it is transformed into samizdat, is expressed in subterfuge gatherings, tries to make a space for itself in conversations, performances, exhibitions that argue for the continuation of discourse. It is, of course, a culture in animated suspension, a process that is familiar to our colleagues in Central and Eastern Europe. Above all, it is a culture that necessarily becomes international, because that is the only route by which we come to understand our peculiarities and the commonalities and, until the frontiers get closed off, the only route that we can take to fight an iniquitous, anti-intellectual regime."

Ioan Davies, *Borderlines* 20/21.

"The need for alternative media, for criticism of our public institutions (government and media), and for insightful analyses of the way media communications operate have all become particularly resonant."

Parallelogram Vol 6 no. 4.

"'Politician', n. An eel in the fundamental mud upon which the superstructure of organized society is reared. When he wriggles he mistakes the agitation of his tail for the trembling of the edifice. As compared with the Statesman, he suffers the disadvantage of being alive."

"'politics', n. A Strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage."

"'vote', n. The instrument and symbol of a freeman's power, to make a fool of himself and wreak of his country."

Ambrose Bierce, *'The Devil's Dictionary'*

There are times, however – and this is one of them – when even being right feels wrong. What do you say, for instance, about a generation that has been taught that rain is poison and sex is death? If making love might be fatal and if a cool spring rain on any summer afternoon can turn a crystal blue lake into a puddle of black poison scum right in front of your eyes, there is not much left except TV and relentless masturbation."

Hunter S. Thompson, *'Generation of Swine'*.

"It is not a question of the 'public', a convenient fiction at best, not 'liking' other cultural forms. We are all schooled to recognise the modulations of dominant culture, but only some take a route through it of rejection or renegotiation. Class, gender and race collide with the vagaries of biography to drive some people through life with an alternative purchase on reality, something which, in the video arena, devolves upon perception (of self, of others and the relation between them) and communication (the mediated nature of perception and interpersonal relations)..."

Sean Cubitt, from *'Timeshift'*

"... We tend to use old solutions for the problems even when they are totally inappropriate. Finding new solutions is very exciting. It can also be very rearding. But it requires some work in directions we are not always used to. That's what lateral thinking is about. That's also what creative video is about ... Effectively, creative video has to do with developing new perceptions, new forms, new thinking about audiovisual language and getting this over to the public."

Alan McLuskey, *European Video Services*.

Centralization leads to monoculture and dinosaurism. Maximum variety of life forms has a much stronger survival capacity, and is therefore more ecological."

Allen Ginsberg, *'Drunken Boat'*.

"I regard a culture that promotes self-confidence to be a requirement for the preservation and enhancement of human dignity. A culture that diminishes or retards people's self confidence, either through what it proposes or omits, I believe is a threat to democracy. When what we do and who we are is not considered culturally significant, when our contribution to society is hidden behind 'big names', then the worth of our lives is diminished compared to the value of comparatively few other people."

Tom Wayman, in *Borderlines* # 14.

"Nothing could be more complex than two human beings meeting. Nothing could be more courageous, in artistic activity, than to risk a performance with no foreknowledge of the outcome and no certainty of personal and collective responses. It takes a rare kind of foolhardiness, to risk all in this way. And to continue the risks as time goes on. For as a direct confrontational exercise for a beginner, or novice, or the experienced player, such a display of inhibition could be seen to have psychological advantages in the pursuit of health. But to base an aesthetic, a life's work, upon such a premise demands a level of courage or foolishness."

Eddie Prevost, from *'No Noise is Innocent'*

"There is no free money. It is all spent for calculated and usually acknowledged purposes: in immediate trading, but also to substitute a healthy for an unhealthy association (as in tobacco sponsorship of sports), or to reassure what are called 'opinion-formers', or to enhance, as it is slyly put, a 'public' image'. The specified manna is for this and that. The general manna is for the public reputation of capitalism. But is it paranoianal manna, from the true paranoianal godfathers, that has no to be most closely looked at."

Raymond Williams, *'Culture and Society'*



# N e w s +

## DECADE SHOW - VIDEO

Since 1984 Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art has been a centre of artistic activity in video. The staff, students and visiting artists have produced hundreds of productions and established the Fine Art Course, the Post-Graduate Diploma Course in Electronic Imaging, and the Television Workshop as leaders in the field.

As part of the college's **Decade Show** it is proposed to stage exhibition in November 92 of video work produced at DJCA at the Seagate Gallery in Dundee. The exhibition will have three key elements:

1. Selection of work by students in thematic packages.
2. Selection of work by artists who have produced work through the Television Workshop.
3. Archive of work produced at the college.
4. A publication 'Moving Images in a Cold Climate'.

The tape packages will be screened on a specially designed and constructed installation, which will seek to engage the viewer beyond the normal passive experience of watching TV. The design will enable the whole exhibition to be offered as a Touring Show.

The Archive will involve a listing of all tapes held in the college's tape archive with information on each production.

For further information contact Steve Partridge at DJCA's Video Department on 0382 23261.

## NOTICE

All over Europe there are thousands of racist attacks each day. And an increasing number of racist murders, many of them carried out by fascist groupings. Yet no European Community government leader has confronted the Nazis head on. Some like John Major, Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterand are prepared to play the race card to their electoral advantage.

The Nazis have grown so confident recently that they have moved away from their right-wing nationalist demands. Le Pen's 'les Francais d'abord' (*French people first*) and the Belgian Vlaam's Blok's 'Eigen Volk Eerst' (*Our own people first*) has been superseded by an unconcealed fascist programme.

On November 16, 1991, Le Pen's deputy leader Bruno Megret publicly put forward a 50-point programme for immigrants. He advocates putting immigrants in 'collection camps' - as the German authorities did last year in

Cottbus - then deporting them. The Front National is claiming that the French Government is already implementing some of their programme.

There is also growing opposition to this rise of fascism. In November last year more than 100,000 people marched in Berlin against fascism and racist murders. This year the same number have marched in Milan and Paris. A major hunger strike has started in France led by immigrant groups against racist immigration laws. In Britain too there have been marches, meetings and demonstrations against the British National Party and the Asylum Bill - an Act of Parliament that seeks to exclude political refugees from entering and settling here.

The anti-racist struggle in Britain must take a Europe-wide view - we must join forces with activists in Europe to campaign against racism. But we must also fight for Social Justice with the million of unemployed, part-time workers, the homeless, the disenfranchised youth and refugees throughout Europe. It is their humiliation, their hardship, oppression and uncertainty that the fascists are manipulating in order to achieve their racist objectives.

European Action for Racial Equality and Social Justice is new alliance, set up in 1989, of individuals who have led many local and national British campaigns such as those around Anwar Ditta, Newton Rose, New Cross Massacre, Bradford 12, MacDonald Inquiry, Ahmed Shiekh, Blair Peach and the Sekohn Family. It also includes individuals active in the trade unions and in independent associations such as Black Workers Groups. European Action will ensure that we join forces with other European activists in order to combat the new wave of fascism and racism:

For further information contact:

**European Action**  
c/o 76a Stroud Green Road,  
London N4 3EN  
Tel 071 272 4889





## EAST MEETS WEST

**T**he Ninth International Festival of Visual Arts takes place between the 29th April to 3rd of May 1992 in Győr in Hungary. The festival aims to provide a 'confrontation zone' in the city near the border of eastern and western Europe in an attempt to build barriers in the way of the 'unified' commercial world culture and to give a chance for 'other' cultures, archaic and new, to be seen. The publicity for the festival states that that it is 'not techniques but spirit that we aim to emphasise'. It continues:

*'The western low culture is trying to mould our brains into shapeless masses, it is attempting to rub off each sulcus of our brains, it is taking away our culture ignoring extra-European cultures. Most of the commercial sky channels are violently stuffing their 'mental hamburgers' into our heads aiming to put a grey mental-spiritual uniform on each and every unique and characteristic intellectuality and minority view, on everything that is different.'*

*'We live in the age of the recolonization of Eastern Europe. It is our turn, after the small nations and countries of Africa, Asia and America. The almighty money is adored, our traditions are disappearing, our small communities are on the verge of disintegration.'*

## ARTISTS FOR AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND

**A**lively idealism has motivated a large group of artists to make a collective stance on the issue of independence. At their first press conference speakers including **Ricky Ross** (of Deacon Blue), **Billy Kay** (historian), **Elaine C. Smith** (actress), **Liz Lochhead** (writer), **Stuart Cosgrove** (journalist, TV presenter - see interview in this issue), **Pat Kane** (Hue and Cry) and **Ken Currie** (painter) expressed a politically non-aligned but determined aim to broaden

the issue of independence beyond purely nationalist concerns: thereby consciously offsetting the increasing danger of it becoming the sole province of the narrow 'fake coherence' of certain political parties. In the long term the project will explore issues relating to the self-determination of Scottish identity through a blend of political action and cultural debate. As a group there are numerous shades of political opinion represented, with the exception of Conservatism: as individuals they share a common experience of trying to live and work in Scotland despite the pressure of the economic shift to the south. Through cultural independence they see a step towards the 'restoration of democracy', at present impinged upon by the British State. As a project it is open to any artist who feels a commitment to independence and who seeks to make the debate more authentic. A larger public meeting is planned and momentum seems to be growing in the lead up to the General Election.

## EUROPEAN VIDEO SERVICES

**E**VS is a network of organisations working in the field of creative video who have got together to create a Europe-wide forum for critical discourse and provide a milieu in which critical thought, networking possibilities, informations and creative exchanges can thrive. EVS was officially founded in February at the VideoFest in Berlin, and some of its founding members include Gen Lock (Switzerland), Danish Video Art Data Bank (Denmark), London Video Access (England), European Media Art Festival (Germany), Vigo International Festival (Spain), and from Scotland, Fields and Frames.

EVS aims to publish a bilingual magazine (English/French) five times a year containing in depth articles about various aspects of creative video, interviews with tape makers, a large number of tape reviews and extensive

information about what's happening in the field of video in Europe.

The members of EVS are preparing a computerised information exchange system which will make it possible for each member to benefit from the information of other members. EVS also plans to

**EVS, c/o Gen Lock, 16 General-Dufour, CH-1204 Geneva, Switzerland. Tel: 41/22/29 36 39 Fax: 41/22/29 33 15**

## EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC FESTIVAL

**L**ondon Musicians' Collective's series of experimental music concerts, featuring the likes of AMM, Eugene Chadbourne, Connie Bauer, Han Bennink, Maggie Nicols, Evan Parker, The Honkies and Andre Jaum, culminates in a major Festival, to run from May 20 - May 24 this year. Among the performers already booked are several rarely seen in Britain: Catherine Jauniaux, the Belgian vocalist who has worked with Test Dept, The Ex and Aksak Maboul; Ikue Mori, the Japanese percussionist of USA seminal 'no wave' band DNA; free improv guitarist Derek Bailey (interviewed in this issue), playing in a duo with drummer John Stevens; Nic Collins and Ben Neill, two of the New York 'downtown' scene associated with John Zorn; Jeffrey Morgan, the American saxophonist known for his work in the Alabama and European free-music scenes; and many British musicians - details are still to be finalised as we go to press - representing most aspects of free jazz, 'new' music, experimental rock, politicised song, asethetic of noise, sound sculpture &c. The Festival, the biggest of its kind in London for many years, comprises five evening and two daytime performances, as well as workshops and sundry distractions such as record stalls, dance, film and video. For full details, including season-ticket offers, write to LMC, 12 Allington Road, London NW4 3DJ or telephone 081-202-2504.



Catherine Jauniaux and Ikue Mori



# Report

## THE GREAT BRITISH MISTAKE

**Vague** 23: God Told Me to Do It

ed. Tom Vague, Vague, London, £3.50

**Vagabond** issue 1

ed. Jon Wozencroft and Jon Savage, Touch (Incunabula Ltd), London, £5.95

*I am a journalist!  
I am the Anti-Christ!  
Don't know what I want  
But I know how to get it ...*

- or something like that, I can't remember. Punk happened a long time ago and was meant (by the few who meant it) to be fugitive; but somehow a 'Lest We Forget' mentality set in, with the result that some of us have spent our entire lives being told how we missed its Golden Age. As with Maureen Lipman's 'Beattie' and the The Nescafe Couple adverts, we are rightly entitled to ask, *Are we never to be shot of this shit?*

**S**ave your stamps and postcards, readers, **Vague** and **Vagabond** tell us 'No'. Both positively wallow in a nostalgia that is doubtless 'postmodern' but which is nevertheless both tiresome and embarrassing. Both are narcissistic works, harking back to times past when their correspondents experienced something

approaching real life - even if they can't disguise the feeling that this was an adolescent 'phase'. God-damit, sure you're true to your own pleasures, but these things pass and you move on. Or do you? 'Vague' seems stuck in about 1979, 'Vagabond' six years later; can't remember what I was doing then, and who cares?

'Underground overground' is how Joel Biroco once described **Vague** - prophetically, as it happens, since nowadays it's about as pertinent and lively as The Wombles. The best bit of this magazine is the 'God Told Me To Do It' graphics at the front: no need to buy it, it isn't worth stealing, just flick through the first few pages in the shop and you'll get the idea. Some will put this pop-culture archaeology down to ear-to-the-ground savvy (**Vague** 23 has plenty of 'good press' snippets by assorted hacks), but I reckon it's just luck. In the present climate of ignorance, the editor who is also known as Vague (who seems to have spent most of his life in front of the TV) still passes as an expert on punk (1976) and the 'New Wave' (1976-End of Time), even though issue 22 saw him admit to never having heard of Eric's, let alone The Chuddy Nuddies. Punk's provincial mentality of isolation, teenagers glued together to John Peel, all checking out the latest sounds, was some kind of strength in the context of '70s England. Back then, folk would reproduce for *functional* purposes an approximation of what they were barely listening to in the first place; now the same raw material is continually, uselessly and self-consciously refined to the point of absurdity. The spirit's gone out of the thing, which in any case could only ever meet the demands of the moment. The form

can still be employed - knee-jerk anarcho-punk pop combos are still pressing indifferently mixed, badly performed records across the world - but such revivals are merely laughable and gauche. Still, God the Market dictates that you can't argue with public taste: punks on the right, please, Elvis impersonators on the left. Barf!

To give it its due, **Vague** more or less acknowledges its own irrelevance. This is the obituary issue, a hotchpotch of incoherent scraps: tired old bits and bobs, retired plagiarists, computer graphics, newspaper cut-ups, a garbled interview with Donald Cammell (taped by Jon Savage, ineptly transcribed by the editor - answer to question on page 55 is 'Borges', as everyone except, apparently, Mick Jagger and Tom Vague knows), and more adverts than the *Sunday Times Colour Supplement*.

**Vague** is washed up, for sure, but its sole prop is self-evidently wrong when he writes '*I know you can't do a Punk Rock fanzine anymore ... but ...*'. The only mystery (God didn't get through to him) is his failure to rehash the back issues in a cash-in 'greatest hits' package, something suggested (as luck would have it) not only by Market Forces but by **Jon Savage**, who reappears as co-editor of the new magazine **Vagabond**.

**Vagabond** is less interesting than **Vague** because, to use the jargon of pop sociology, it is patently less 'authentic'. This is superficially surprising given the credentials of its contributors: Malcolm McLaren, the shopkeeper who in popular mythology gave birth to punk; Caroline Coon, its midwife; Jamie Reid, its tailor; Neville Brody, its cosmetic surgeon; and Simon Frith and Savage himself, a pair among its many undertakers. Assorted zanies are to hand as well, ranging from hardened hacks and media handmaidens like Mark Sinker and Adair Brouwer (researcher for the tawdry *Art Is Dead* TV series), to decrepit New Age musical 'shamans' like Ze'v and A.M. McKenzie, who contributes some tiresome psychobabble of the kind punk once tried its damndest to exterminate.

Given the recent history of this line-up of luminaries, it's a bit much to find at the back of the book an afterword which states that '*the whole "style" section of the media has to die*'. Well, guys, you said it and it was your baby - so fuck off and kill yourselves!

Whereas **Vague** retains some vestige of charm in its slapdash graphics and wild, amateur over-lays (though recent issues have gone decidedly 'up-market' - well, so what?), **Vagabond** is dismally





'designed'. A key feature is the inclusion of the work of the aforementioned Brody and Reid - rather the bumbblings of a group of talented fourteen year olds than the senseless interference of these tiresome and over-rated 'professionals'. Get thee behind me, has-beens!

**Vague** is clumsy, but **Vagabond** is merely lazy. **Vague** at least is a product consonant with the spirit of punk, an *auto da fe* labour of passion. Like **The Modern Review** (brainchild of Julie Bur-chill and other Wapping-based knobs), you can't help but feel that **Vagabond** is a case of The Guilty Rich slumming it in the samizdat world, Fleet Street flaneurs. They call themselves, grandiosely enough, '*media workers*', and demand '*a perestroika of a whole section of the English media*'; but what they offer is more poor-quality drivel of the kind that evidently clogs up their day jobs. There is something curiously unselfconscious about this publication - hinted at in items like 'Professor' Simon Frith's back-of-a-beer-mat jottings (*'I'm quite sure that when 21st Century cultural commentators look back ...'* blah, blah, blah - a clear threat of more of the same for the next one hundred years - and we're only on page 51). This isn't 'media literacy', as they claim, it's just unselfcritical and unimaginative journalism.

It's confusing too, because they're claiming to be on 'our' side, and the editorial pre-empt's criticism by laying claim to the higher moral ground; perhaps they are sincere in their intentions, but their collective (?) whine about '*how shitty it can be to work in the media: scheming a way through a complicated system of humiliation, cynicism and envy*' rings hollow and summons up visions of the Vagabonds crying all the way to the bank. Throwing in a free bumper-sticker (*'Baby I'm Bored'*) doesn't help. What am I meant to do with it - stick it on my shoe?

Punk rock burnt out a lifetime or so ago, but (baby) how the fumes still linger. Some of its casualties still get high on sniffing the vapour; others are reformed addicts released back into the community and gainfully employed. A few are still out on 'the street' (place where 'the kids' hang out), where they peddle relics and supply the cult's initiates. What they all have in common is a fatal problem: they, whose careers were built on ranting at the prevalence of boredom, have grown into the very thing they once despised. Their writings, their music, their self-aggrandizing canon, their half-baked analyses, their stolen empty slogans, their petit-bourgeois anarchy, their wanky



sense of design, their half-arsed style, their one-and-a-half-arsed anti-style, their smug and patronising pronouncements on whatever the fuck comes into the in-trays they have for heads, are a dead weight on vitality, on change, on the present. They are to a (wo)man terminally dull, washed-up, boring old farts.

Across the land once more the cry is raised, as on our knees we choke: *Somebody open a goddam window, somebody let in some air!*

DAVE MILTON

BABY  
I'M  
BORED





# DESPITE



Despite TV is a video cooperative based in London's East End. They presently run a policy of cheap access to video production and post-production facilities which is open to all members of the community. They also train their own members in all the stages of production in an attempt to demystify the machinations of the media. They have produced 13 magazine type tapes, their style pre-dating the youth magazine programmes taken up by television. The group are probably better known nationally amongst video enthusiasts and activists alike for their tapes on the Wapping dispute in 1986 (*Despite the Sun*) and their documentary around the national Anti-Poll Tax demonstration in London 1990 (*Battle of Trafalgar*). Of *Despite the Sun*, one critic wrote: *'(it) equals and excels most of the broadcast material because they know the area better, and because they are in struggle, taping police attempts to stop both themselves and a BBC crew from taping, while the BBC failed to cover the story at all ... The effect of the tape itself is not to document as such ... The effect is not one of clear explanation, rational reportage, balance. It is of urgency, even desperation, of confusion and the constant threat - and frequent actuality - of violence.'* (Sean Cubitt)

Malcolm Dickson spoke to DTV members Mike Steventon, Chris Kilby and Frank Mueller.

**Q: How did *Despite TV* come about, what kind of ideas were circulating amongst its original members?**

**A:** It started in 83/84 out of Tower Hamlets Arts Project Bookshop which had some funding from GLC and GLA for community video. They originally had a B/W reel to reel and they got some money and a worker and a colour Ferguson VHS portapak. There was an idea to start up a video magazine to get people involved working on and in the videos. It would be about local things and would attempt to touch on political things in the area of Tower Hamlets. The first thing I shot myself was when Thatcher visited the Docklands, which I think was her first visit; and we shot the commotion that it caused. We continued to shoot various other things throughout the history of the mags which went on from '86 to '89.

An idea behind the mag was that we hoped that it might tie into cable television when that started and would have some opportunity when they started giving out franchises. Originally there was this thing built into cable that they would have to provide a community information channel, and we were hoping to take part - if not run it - because we were doing all that stuff beforehand and still are. At the time it was all new although there was the model in the States and Canada. That's what we wanted here. But the cable thing all started falling to bits, so the extra trimmings - like community access channels - were the first to go. It's mostly Americans who've bought it and they're only interested in Data Communication, not in making television at all. But we kept making the magazine and what we did was take it around ourselves, to pensioners clubs, youth clubs and anywhere else that people gathered in sufficient numbers. At one time it was showing to about 800 pensioners an issue and there was, for a while, a magazine coming out every month for the first ten numbers. It was very touch and go: the audience

varied a lot which was good, but it was a lot of work, and it was hard to get around to these places. We worked at that for a long time, but we wanted to get the distribution sorted out. We tried various things - the video shops weren't interested because there was this whole set-up where the frontage is all tied up with major distributors and with feature films. We tried pubs, but they're all controlled by the big breweries as to what they could play and the laws were quite strict then. We tried community distributors and we couldn't even get them to distribute us. There was the possibility of libraries, but the only library that had video was in Docklands and it was funded by LDDC (London Docklands Development Corporation) to do that. At that time the libraries were in dispute because the unions didn't want to handle videos, they were trying to get a better pay deal and they saw this as an extra thing being added to their workload.

We started to think that there must be some other way to do things. The Miner's strike happened and we devoted a large part of a magazine to that. That was successful, we ended up with a tape that was really popular and was sold and bootlegged on picket lines. It gave us the idea of focussing around things a bit more. When something happened in our area we decided to maybe make a whole tape about it because it was a local issue. It was really important and it was about the kind of things we were interested in, about how local areas were being restructured and how the politics were changing.

Our second single-issue tape was *'Despite the City'*, which we got development money for. It's about the encroachment of the City on the Docklands and the East End and, in turn, the encroachment of the Docklands on the East End. Property prices were going up and the East End was getting squeezed in the middle. We worked on *'Despite The Poll Tax'* for about six months. As a part of that tape we wanted to record the Anti-Poll Tax demonstration, when that happened on March 30th 1990. We went along to that to film it just as a part of this tape we were making, and then it ended up the Police turned it into a riot. We had all this unique footage, because a lot of the press weren't there from the beginning - we had four cameras there so we recorded it from just about every angle. We also got offers from people who were on the march to use their footage. We went to Channel 4 and said we that we wanted to make a TV programme about it, that we had all this stuff and that we were well versed in the background of it. We'd been making a tape up until then, some footage from which we showed them, which resulted in us being commissioned, and so *'Battle of Trafalgar'* was made. That took six months and then we screened it and we got a lot of response which was really good and supportive. We took it to some festivals and made some quite good contacts for future work.

**Q: How were the earlier tapes funded? What kind of local political infrastructure, in terms of funding, could allow a group such as yourself to make things that were explicitly political, and certainly outside the control of the local parliamentary state?**

**A:** In the beginning we weren't funded, it was a combination of the culture that existed at the time: the GLC was still around, there was the Workshop sector which was quite large at the time and there were a lot of groups, like Lambeth Video and London Video Arts, and other places that were doing access video. So there was an environment around independent film and video which has died off to a large extent since the change in attitude and politics in the late 80's. Of course, a lot of the people who got involved in DTV then







Despite TV on location

- as now - were unemployed and were getting politicised by being unemployed, so we were attracted to this kind of communication method, because we wanted to say things about what we thought was wrong and what we were experiencing. But when it came to applications for funding, there was money around through the GLC and GLA. Also, the local borough was Labour at the time. We got funding from those various sources at various times, it wasn't always all of them, sort of mix and match really. But as that started to disappear it became more and more difficult to operate, also some of the grant giving bodies changed their politics and started asking for more training oriented things and they weren't giving us very much leeway in terms of what they wanted for the grant they were giving. They were setting our agenda and eventually it came to a point where there wasn't enough money to bother towing their line, so we decided to set up a co-op, break free and start to earn money. That was when Despite TV started making contact - we'd been in contact with Channel 4 before - but things started happening when we got development money for *Despite the City*. Although we were still getting some funding at the very beginning, it wasn't very long before we shifted over to being able just to make programmes and make enough money just to do it without funding. At the moment we are not funded by any-agencies

**Being based in the East End, the whole function of the tapes seems to be to engage and encourage a local community in a dialogue but also to encourage support for certain campaigns. Is this your main function?**

**A:** I haven't said much about access which is what we were and are about a lot. Our vision - I guess - was to see television change into what we were trying to be, or for us to provide a doorway into television, so that maybe we could provide a space maybe within, say, Channel 4, which seemed the most acceptable area for it to exist: to try and create a way for people in your street, basically, to be able to make video and get support, information, training and access to television. If we made these tapes we thought that at least some of it would end up on television so that other people would be inspired to do the same thing. We hoped that the thing would spread

and that there would be other groups set up in other places. There were other organisations up and down the country doing it, but in different ways. We were sick of watching television that was all made - almost entirely - by white middle class men. We were looking for a variety of voices and we were trying to have that happen in Despite TV. As well as the interest in television, there was the cable thing, which originally - as an idea - would be a local thing and so it would be possible to make things of local relevance. I mean this television thing's like a sideline that has only happened because cable failed in what a lot of people hoped it would do.

**Q: It hasn't disillusioned the group that much to make it want to cease to function. But with the collapse of coherent political opposition and the demise of the workshop sector, how do you see yourself operating, in comparison with earlier ideas of demystifying the whole notion of television and access?**

**A:** We're still doing that, but now we're demystifying how to run a business as well. We'd like the whole project to be all production, but in order to keep ourselves independent we have to engage in this business, which isn't ideal but it gives us freedom, and it's tough because sometimes you find yourself doing things that really you just don't want to do, but you have to have this longer term goal. I also think that having survived this long, and finding a lot of other workshops that haven't survived gives you a little more impetus to go on, and maybe we've got something that works with this co-op thing: everybody should theoretically be able to operate everything. One of the battles is to keep training everybody, so that we don't have *only* directors or *only* editors.

**Q: The workshop sector was founded on principles of access, training, the sharing of skills and the 'collective confidence' that comes out of that. Do you feel isolated as a result of the decline in the independent sector?**

**A:** Isolated seems the wrong word. We've always felt slightly



apart from the other workshops because we work differently, though we also felt a lot of kinship through productions. We don't have full time workers - everyone in the co-op is a worker - no one's on a salary here, there's a lot of volunteering, which means a lot of people working towards making this thing happen. People who stay with Despite TV get this thing out of it which is what the co-op's about. If you were just one or two workers from a normal community workshop and you go along to Channel 4 with some idea, and if they say 'You're wrong', well sometimes you feel wrong. But if you've got ten to twenty people and you've discussed everything beforehand and then you go to a meeting at Channel 4 you can say 'Wait a minute', because you've got all the arguments because you discussed it all with others who feel the same way. Because there are so many of us and we have a clear idea of what we are doing, we don't feel isolated so much as feeling independent. We don't know much about what is going on in the other groups and I think that's probably true of them as well. The network has fallen apart because of the funding disappearing, and there isn't so much grant aid anymore, so everybody has had to retreat to their own ground and we've all sort of suffocated. We have better contact with the rest of the world than we do with London. Here you don't get information from anywhere else about what's going on. **Independent Media** is about the only source of information. It used be that **City Limits** had a section, I used to read that all the time. Those things have all fallen away and there isn't the culture any more to support it in the same way. There's still the interest but the money to support it isn't there.

**Q: Using television as an example of a centre-out model which a group like Despite TV and many others challenge: it epitomises our relation to power which is exercised through notions of 'professionalism', which in turn cloaks the inherent class bias of the media industry. For example, shooting on lo-band or VHS is dismissed as 'amateur', and certainly 'not the proper way to present news'. Is the desire to challenge this an important part of the group's aim?**

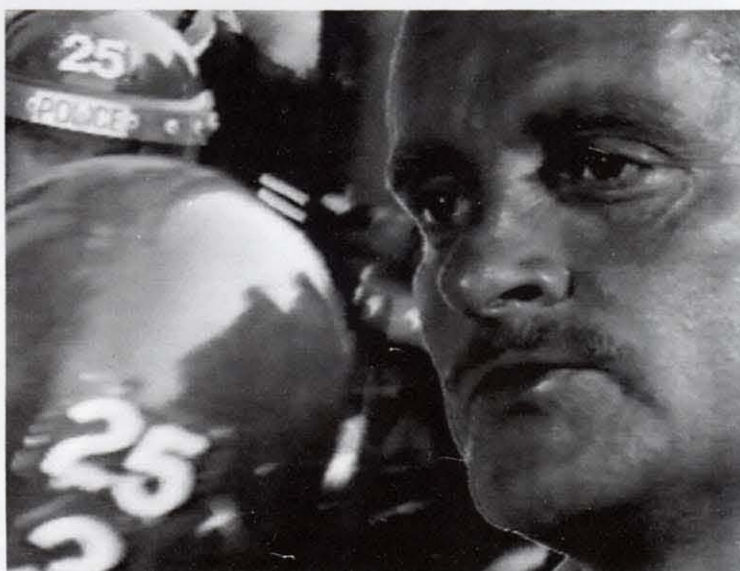
**A:** That's what we wanted all along from the beginning, but the support network's fallen down so now it's harder to do that. When we had grant aid we could have more people coming through the co-op and we could have more activity because we weren't spending much time trying to make money and make it run so we had more time to engage with people. And you know there are so many people making interesting tapes who haven't got enough money to make or finish them and they all come to us so now what is happening is that we are taking over from the funding bodies, we are becoming volunteer funding people. Like we are helping to finish projects. It's all very nice, but we've got some ideas too!

**Q: At the same time you've got the dangle of the carrot - the allure of higher production standards, the attraction of making that the priority. How do you cope with this?**

**A:** Well, the television thing is a double edged sword. Channel 4 has given us some freedom in that we don't have to depend on the funding bodies for our survival. With *Battle of Trafalgar* it was easier for them to say 'Yes', because we had something unique and because of that they could accept that it was shot on VHS and so on. Would they accept the VHS if it wasn't unique footage? I think maybe they would, but it's harder, so there is a kind of pressure when you think that what you

are making might be a possible for television - you try and up the standards. There are good reasons for this, because it doesn't help to represent someone in a really degraded way, it's not good to interview travellers, for example, and have really bad sound. People have to come across looking good, so on that level you improve standards, but as far as using equipment - and if we had the money - we would tend to go more for new technologies which are producing better quality but are still small and affordable. It's also more accessible because we don't have to train people for so long. It's not unnecessarily complicated and it isn't mysterious: all the buttons are labelled, whereas on professional equipment it's designed for people who have trained to be engineers or video editors or something. They don't have to put labels on because they know what these things are, so the technology's changing. I look forward to a day, possibly, when there is such a saturation of cameras out there that Despite TV won't have to have its own cameras, we'll just provide an edit facility which is available to all the people who are out there shooting stuff everyday. It does look as if there is going to be a home editing market, which will obviously be influenced by television. If that happens then I think we would be involved in trying to show people it could be used for other things, for communication of information and politics. We haven't really got to that point yet. That's not the situation here, but it is happening a bit in the States.

**Q: You mentioned earlier the problems of distribution and the possibility of tapping into the high street rental market. That was an**



**opportunity that was missed out on in its early days, before it was taken over by the larger corporate interests.**

**A:** Some people tried, it just didn't work. London's got 9 million people, while Toronto's got 2 million. In Toronto you have all kinds of independent video shops which hire obscure things, but they do it with a cross section, so they have some political, some B-movies, art films, a variety of stuff. Here, you'd think that out of the 9 million there be enough people to support at least one of these places. If you even forget the people who are trying to do it for political reasons, what about the entrepreneurs, the film buffs and all those different interest groups? Why hasn't this thing been set up by someone? Despite TV has got its hands full, but it would be nice to see someone set up independent distribution on the high street. I don't know why it hasn't happened.









People used to think that if you had the means of production then you could make television. No way. It's the means of distribution that you need. The means to make it are important, but not nearly as important as being able to get out there and communicate. Television succeeds in stifling that, it just makes it so difficult, because there's such a gate-keeping thing where people are excluded from the media and having only four channels contributes to this. This country has got a really tough situation for gaining access. Channel 4 was like a major in-road into television and people all over the world envy it. It's almost an incongruity now, because the rest of the system's so tight, like radio's the same way. They used to tell us there wasn't room for more than four stations on the radio and that was the excuse for why there weren't more. It's the same with television. There's plenty of ways to have more television.

**Q: Working with Channel 4 on *Battle of Trafalgar* was productive then?**

**A:** It was pretty good. Channel 4's been under pressure from the outset to change their politics and so the part that's about access and about new and interesting forms of television has been squeezed a lot. **Alan Fountain** was our contact and he understands what we're trying to do and wants to support it. He's provided us with a lawyer to keep us and them from getting into difficulties concerning the legal aspects. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act has never been pushed, so in some ways I think they were probably thinking that if it's going to happen it will happen to *Despite TV*. Let's sit back and see how far you can push it, that sort of thing. But they footed all the bills for that, and we were really well covered.

We had to negotiate the contract quite a bit to accommodate the notion that a co-op can make television with the right resources, and anybody could do it without having years of television experience.

**Q: Weren't there constraints imposed? What about the editing process?**

**A:** We did it in sections so that the people who shot certain sections, say from Kennington Park to Westminster Bridge would sit down and edit that. But we discussed it collectively at regular meetings. Channel 4 didn't tell us what to do or how to edit but it was very restrictive having an hour to tell something that happened over ten hours. What do you leave out?

**Q: What sort of problems did you encounter with the *Free for All* commission?**

**A:** That was a sub-commission through the company that was commissioned by Channel 4 to do the series. We couldn't get a contract with them until we were a week into the project. The guy controlling it - a professed socialist - just stalled on the contract, so we nearly didn't make the programme, because like a day before the shooting was supposed to start, he was saying 'oh we can't agree this contract, we're not going to make this programme', and the next thing we know we are making it. It was just all over the place, the guy was really uncomfortable. In the end we did start making it and we shot all this stuff, and he wanted to see every stage; most of the time he missed the point that, for example, a rough edit is not something that is finished! It came to the stage where we were doing the on-line edit and he's still trying to make changes, having spent most of the budget doing this on-line and he's stalling it by saying, 'I don't want this in there, I don't want that', and some of the things he was contesting

was stuff he'd already said was fine; but the particular thing that was a real problem for us was that he didn't like the titles that we'd put on people, which gave the name and the group that they were involved or aligned with. He felt this wasn't good and that Channel 4 wanted 'ordinary' people, and these people weren't ordinary because they belonged to groups. We refused to take off the titles on the basis of that twisted logic that as soon as an 'ordinary' person joins a group they're null and void and don't have a voice anymore. We delivered the tape but said that we don't want a credit. In the end they did edit out these bits, it looked really crap because they edited a generation down and also they put a credit for us. That was a really nasty experience. The unfortunate thing was that the people that we interviewed had agreed to talk to us because of our integrity, so to all intents and purposes they're being shafted.

**Q: What is in the pipeline then and what's the direction for the group?**

**A:** We may embark on a project about the politics of redevelopment and how it's a classic rip-off, and illustrating how monetarism, Thatcherism, and maybe the LDDC fit in with developers. We're also making a tape which is based around a shoot we did at Gay Pride which may be about the politics of being gay and lesbian at this time, but with a whole range of ideas: about self-examination, being black and gay or lesbian, equal opportunities, being out of work, Outrage.

As a result of *Battle of Trafalgar*, we've been going to a lot of festivals and we've made a lot of contacts. We've actually managed to sell the screening rights of *Battle of Trafalgar* to educational television in Ontario, and there are things that can be done over there and probably over in Europe as well. Even though we're based in a locality and we're talking about local things, the politics of what's going on have repercussions all over the world.

**Q: Do you think an oppositional impetus might resurface again if you just keep carrying on what you're doing in terms of trying to network and get access to media and to culture? Do you think it might be radically different from what it was in the 80s?**

**A:** Well, it is radically different from the 80's, because the only people that are really left are those that are really vehement about it, so you've lost all the liberal sorts. Those left are consolidating themselves and maybe just keeping their heads low because it's not the easiest time to function. But I think we're kind of working it out, it looks like there's not a lot going on outside, but there's a lot going on inside. We're restructuring ourselves and finding how to make this thing work and we're going to be a lot stronger when we come through this - I think that is when we'll start to grow and become more visible.





# ***MEDIA MOGULS***



Mr Sinclair as MC in Halfway to Paradise





# MENTAL POLLUTION

**INTERVIEW:** DOUG AUBREY

'Big Star in a Wee Picture' is a Glasgow based TV production company run by Stuart Cosgrove and Don Coutts - the former a TV presenter, ex-NME writer and cultural commentator, and the latter an ex-BBC Community Programme Unit Producer and film and TV Director with an active involvement in the Trade Union movement. Big Star are perhaps best known for their 'popular culture' programmes, ranging from documentaries such as the recent *Trainer Wars* to the cult-like and underrated series *Halfway To Paradise* and the freebie Pop TV spectacle *The Big Day*. They were interviewed by Doug Aubrey.

**D.C:** Don Coutts

**S.C:** Stuart Cosgrove

**Q:** You're probably the most successful of the 'New Wave' of production companies currently based in Scotland. Do you attribute that success to the fact that you are trying to do things differently, or perhaps that the people who are doing things are bereft of ideas?

**D.C:** I think one of the reasons that we have been mildly successful is that we both came back to Scotland with other careers: Stuart was a major cultural writer - one of Stuart's huge 'pluses' is that he crosses over boundaries in ways that lots of other people don't. I think that has helped the company immensely. He is a good broadcaster, very articulate and he writes very well, he is seen very much as someone who mediates well. I was really lucky in that I had had a successful career with the BBC, then gone on to form a company that did

a lot of Channel 4 stuff, so we came back up armed with contacts. In Scotland, people think differently about TV - they see it as a lesser animal. I actually like TV immensely, I think it is a brilliant medium, and I much prefer it to going along to the GFT, and sitting with four people and looking at a film. Having said that, I like film, it is not either/or, but we think differently about our product. We like cheap programming, we like series', we like glitz and things, we are lucky because the two people who run it are both practitioners. That means that we are both working as opposed to doing deals all the time, and I just think we have somehow worked out a system where while working on one series we are cranking out other ideas. We are interested in sport, in the media, in books, and we work with a lot of people: so we have got a huge kind of catchment. This has put us into a different position than, say, a small company who are only doing one-offs, which I think doesn't work on TV.

**S.C :** One of the things for me is that I grew up theoretically in terms of development intellectually - doing a lot of reading that was influenced by the theoretical project around SEFT (Society for Education in Film and Television) and *Screen* magazine, and all the arguments that were coming out of there about semiotics and structuralism: that's when my education was at its height. I was a post-graduate and lecturing in film studies. In a kind of sustained way that project was also a kind of war on auteurism, about a criticism of a particular way of seeing cinema and where ideology became as important as the auteurist vision, where structures and groups of feelings were considered as important as an individual mind. I guess what happened for me was that I began to become deeply aware that the ideas of the director as auteur were not things which I believed had a great deal of cultural, theoretical, or critical interest. So when you come back to a country - the country that I love almost to the extent of parodying patriotism - and the central argument that's still being offered, is a kind of dated 50's idea of auteurism unreconstructed, where the





director says 'it is my script and I say what goes, I have a vision, it is my project and I'm developing this': you hear all this and you say 'for fuck sake, it's the dark ages'. It wasn't that I thought the film industry in Scotland was crap, and that you had to enforce a sort of scorched earth policy, but just maybe in a way that it was time other voices should be in there questioning it, because the established ones come with such a powerful authority. If you listen to people, you still hear the myth about characters who haven't had a film on screen for three years, characters who were always perpetually developing these scripts that never seemed to appear. I wanted to say there are other ways of thinking about it, that I actually respect whole areas of Scottish culture that are not obsessed by that, whether that is in the area of pop music or literature, or the other areas where Scottish culture is so much more proactive, and so much more rich and aware of the community of Scotland than film is. I think film is probably the weakest achievement of post-war Scottish culture.

**Q. Is it still the case that to gain recognition and support it is necessary to 'go elsewhere'?**

S.C: I remain convinced of the pretty sad fact that if you want to work as a Scot, in other words if representations of the Scottish condition, character and politics are part of what you want to do, you've got to be twice as good to get half of the attention. I worked at the heart of what I would consider to be conventional English cultural broadcasting, on *The Late Show*, and I know for a fact that its agenda places Scotland in a disproportionate position more than it even places architecture. So you know that the architecture of Bristol sometimes has more status than a whole nation, which is disenfranchised and which has its own extremely rich cultural history. If you take that as a kind of metaphor and spread it outwards to the way people work, it is undoubtedly the case that in order to even get a project off the ground at **Channel 4** that comes with the character of Scotland throughout it, you are immediately pigeonholed into either 'current affairs' or 'news story'. If it is culture and light entertainment it seems it doesn't quite fit, because it has got 'minority taste'. 'Would it sell in the South-East of England?' You get into all those things and I think it gets immensely difficult.

D.C: Having said all that, there are some people who we have worked with who haven't been away and they're stuck into making careers in what they do. It's such a small country, some people can thrive.

**Q: There is still an almost 'Luddite' type of reluctance to embrace new technologies within the moving picture industry up here. Why do you think that is?**

S.C: Yeah, I think this is a really complex issue, and it is probably one of the few issues that Don and I perpetually squabble about, and at the heart of the squabble is, how we use the word 'Luddite' now: because we use 'Luddite' in its purely perjorative sense as a kind of meaning of rejection of the future in favour of a kind of a more rarified past, and I think that's right, but it is also the case that **Ned Ludd's** leadership of the peasantry was also premised on the belief that he felt people's lives and livelihoods were at risk. Their sense of pride in their profession was at risk. So there are positive things to Ludditism that need to be kept in mind. I would like to think that increasingly we will use new technology, cheaper new technology - we do already use Hi-8 cameras, super-8 cameras and although it's hardly new technology, it falls into the technology of small forms. All

the time we are grabbing bits of things that are out there on whatever mechanism is available to us. But what we have here is the coming together of two different notions of socialism. Don believes in the preservation and articulation of solid principles of trade unionism that were very much a part of broadcasting in the 70's and 80's. I suppose what I argue, and which is much more enthused by the hip-hop argument, is that new technology changes the moment, changes the whole debate about the ownership of rights, the ownership of the means of production and all the rest of it. It is one thing I would like to sit and argue about, because it is ultimately about the protection of workers rights against ownership of the means of production. So it is centrally - for me - an argument within socialism. But for us it remains unresolved.

My argument again would be 'What is it?' It is creative to use new technology in ways that throw up new images and ideas, it is desirable that a new generation of 'technocists' or creators - whether out of artschool, college or community groups - find their way through the use of that apparatus into an industry.

Ludditism emerged at a moment of profound change in the way things were manufactured. Similarly, if the technical side of TV wasn't in profound jeopardy, in fear of its livelihood, if things weren't as precarious, if the freelance market wasn't so capricious, then I think you could bring in a system of youth - I say youth: 'young-of-mind' training - because in lots of ways the vast majority of people we work with actually *really* want to hand their skills on, but what they don't want to do is have their skills ripped off, to be put on the scrap heap at 47 years old because of something called 'youth'. There is that appalling kind of seduction that they are young so they have got great ideas, but actually when most young people come to you, they come to you with ideas like I think we should do a documentary on the rave scene: that is not an idea, that's a phenomenon which 2 million people have thought of.

D.C: I think one of the problems being where we are is you end up having to solve all the problems. It would be so much better if we were right wing! We wouldn't have the problems of guilt, no morality to juggle. We face a system we don't necessarily believe in, but either we interface with it and get on with it or we have no stake in the market place.

**Q: You have a track record in everything from crafted social documentaries to pop promo's - is there a risk that rather than showing a commitment to a particular form, or concern for an issue, you could be accused of producing a kind of 'media porridge'? Isn't there a risk that the output just becomes the same?**

S.C: I should say 'yes' to this one, in the sense that it gets to the heart of our programme making in a way. It boils down to two central choices and to me it hinges on this: you either develop projects using the baby metaphor - that you nurture it, and it's yours and you protect it and you don't let anyone else near it, or adulterate or harm it in any way. You have seen it into the world, you know the best schools for it. It is researched, the idea is weaned and it is directed by the person who has researched it, and they worry about every bit of it. You either do that, or you are part of an industry that produces more things, so your relationship to the idea has to change, you have to push the baby away, you have to push the boat out: I suppose that is the other appalling analogy. We have to be that other one. It would be dead easy for Don and I to go up in my loft and develop



a project over three months, keep all the money Big Star has ever had coming through its books, and we'd do quite nicely for the next three years. We would become the sort of people who appear ghost-like every two or three months who tell you a project was 'in the can'.

**Q: Do you believe that there is still room for resistance, dissent or radical thinking on our TV screens?**

**D.C:** It is difficult, it is a matter of defining what is radical, and what is dissenting within. I haven't seen the *De-Classified Elements* tape about Drumchapel, for example, but I'm assuming that kind of thing is made to be looked at within the community centre, and it engenders a kind of community and anger and positivity within that community. I think if it was shown on TV it would have a much more dissipated role. I certainly know when I worked on the Community Programme Unit at the BBC I made much more radical programmes than when I moved to Channel 4. The people who are buying our ideas have a certain view of life which is probably not shared by me, or you, or Stuart. But either you accept that and go with it, or stay within the safety of your own radicalism and the people who are going to agree with it. I personally find that a lot of the 'Troops-Out' kind of films, for instance, are very technically boring and quite uninteresting and don't work on TV, but as a piece of political hectoring and as things to get people going they are great. You have to look at your product and look at where it is going to be shown, or read, or seen. I think it is possible to be radical, but *how* and *in what way*, is different from showing something in a prison or a community centre. I'm not certain how I feel about it, but certainly at Channel 4, if you go in and say you want to make something which is along the SWP political lines they would politely say fuck off. So there is a kind of political harness that you're not allowed to have on your book. It depends; I see things like *Ring My Bell* as being quite radical, I think it is an interesting idea which is clothed in a popular TV mode, I like it.

**S.C:** It is interesting you should say *Ring My Bell*. It reminds me of the access television model that was good in the 70's and latterly less so in the 80's. *Free for All* has kind of resurrected it just now, but it still bears for me the traces of something that has not quite worked. It is extremely difficult in a highly professionalised and commodified industry to all of a sudden bring somebody in and present their idea - within the same kind of commodity restrictions - and hope that they will come over as 'professional' and as 'articulate' as the people who are 'represented' on TV. It just does not work like that, but what is interesting about *Ring My Bell* is that the media has changed and that interactivity between viewer and source ought to be much more profound than it is just now. British TV has really lagged behind America, in particular, in that respect: America for all sorts of bizzare reasons not all to do with radical ideas. I would love Big Star to crack a programme that was interactive with an audience that is out there. It couldn't be on the model of *Halfway to Paradise*, but I certainly know there is an interactive programme to be made that could give a voice to all of those people that you know are out there in Scotland, Ireland or the North of England - or even London - with stories to tell and who have perspectives on life. TV even lags behind radio in that respect.

**Q: How important and relevant are sub-cultures to your view of popular/populist culture and does 'art' have any place?**

**S.C:** My feelings are that sub-cultures are important to us, but I think British post-war cultural theory and the kind of tradition that **Jon Savage** has come through, has tended to see sub-culture as being youth sub-cultures, they have over-dominated: it is what Don would call the kind of 'fascism of youth' that they have almost over determined their rights to things to do with consumption. The media is obsessed with the machinations of youth, because it seems buzzy and sexy, different and dangerous and all the rest of it. But there is no doubt about it *Halfway to Paradise* was in lots of ways Scotland's tribute to the sub-cultures, it was saying that a bowling club is a sub-culture, a guy who dresses up as a cowboy and lives in Bridgeton is part of a sub-culture: these are sub-cultures of the dominant culture which either suppresses them or marginalises them, but certainly sees them as not quite fitting in. *Halfway to Paradise* was much more interested in 'old' culture, it was actually much more an interrogation of nostalgia, the past, the sixties: a culture that was not youth. We actually had an editorial policy of not putting on too much youth.



Stuart Cosgrove of Big Star in a Wee Picture

**Q: Stuart - as an occasional presenter on the 'Late Show', do you think that the cult of the TV personality risks becoming over influential, or even worse, more important than the subjects or ideas presented and discussed?**

**S.C:** I have nightmares about all of that because I think there is a difficult situation where the presenter becomes associated with a set of ideas or a product or whatever. Take Channel 4 here, it's the same sort of publisher/broadcaster. Channel 4 are very obsessed with the idea of how will it be presented, who will present it and what will the presentation say? I can understand that because it is part of what their job is, but one of the difficult things about that is that in order to get a project off the ground you look for the mysterious and new presenter who they have not discovered, and whom ultimately they can uncover as a star. They are not interested in me saying we have got this idea about pool and snooker and it will be presented by Don's Mum, a 72 year old woman who has taken it up in the last quarter of her life. That doesn't







fit into their notion of presentation - she might be precisely the right person to present such a programme but they wouldn't be interested. But they're very interested in us discovering Flavia McDougall, who may be slightly sexy and give off excitement. There is always the idea of the next generation, the next **Jonathan Ross**, which is bizarre in a way; and so I feel kind of culpable, but I don't think I have ever really fitted into that. I have never had a mainstream programme and although it may seem otherwise, I'm not on the TV in the way Jonathan Ross or *Muriel Gray* or people like that are. In lots of ways I'm on TV as a 'bit of rough' or kind of

wild-card or something like that.

**Q: How important is it for you both to be at 'home' doing the things you think are important?**

**D.C:** I remember we both had this fantasy about coming back to this land of milk and honey, when actually it's a land which is riddled with homophobia, racism and snobberies. Having been back here now for four years I'm much more realistic about my fellow Scots, which is why I feel quite edgy about



nationalism, because I would like to think that we were a country of liberal, free thinking, caring people. But I'm not entirely convinced.

**S.C:** One of the things that really dispirits me about Scotland - despite all the nationalist and devolutionary impulses within the country that we are engaged in - is that smug consensus and a consensus of a country that has not done what other countries have done before it. It is obvious to point out places like Latvia, Estonia and places like that. But they are small countries and they have had a tremendously difficult time establishing their independence and in lots of ways we've set things up at much more a kind of coffee table level of independence. I'm slightly fearful of the kind of smug consensus that there is around of 'Isn't everything exciting?'. There is way that we need to find intellectual plurality in Scotland, and I want to live in that consensus where we all have a left Liberal view on the agenda. The absence of that is what I most hate about Scotland.

**Q: It was a good comment Dick Gaughin made once about the need for Scotland to become independent, for people to become more Scottish and less anti-English.**

**S.C:** Well certainly, whatever 'more Scottish' might mean. I would rather rephrase it to say I would like to see more versions of Scottishness. I can rest my case on that, because I think we still haven't found the Scottish answer to **Shere Hite** or **Andrea Dworkin**, **Candida Royale**, the Scottish answer to **Madonna** - just to take at random four very different women working in the media. We still have a very restricted idea of what an articulate Scottish woman is.

**D.C:** My worry about nationalism and independence is what's going to happen to the upper classes, because they're all here anyway. My thing is 'Beware the Barbour Jacket'. I know as a child the Scottish Nationalists, to me, were the Tartan Tories and I think the power and money still resides in Volvo's and Barbour Jackets today. Somehow we as Scottish people have got to see where that is, stop voting that in, start rejecting it and start having something that is good and powerful and will fill the vacuum left by England. That's my problem, but having said that I'm happy to be a tartan lemming and go rushing over the side of the cliff, because it is more interesting than what is being given to us now.

**S.C:** I'm motivated very much by the cultural realities of the politics you're voting for and all the rest of it. Politics in the kind of committee sense really doesn't interest me. How is it Alex Salmond (of the Scottish Nationalist Party) and Donald Dewar (of the Labour Party) can't sit in the same room as each other? So one of them believes in the notion of the Union and socialism through democratic process, the other believes in the breaking up of the Union but both of them are so engaged in a circus of party politics. I think a lot of what is going on just now around the Constitutional Convention, around the Independence in Europe ticket that the SNP are promoting, around Ravenscraig and all that - it's being held back by quite narrow Party thinking.

**Q: Why do you think that Scottish youth culture - and pop music in particular - is so obsessed with a kind of de-politicised Americana?**

**S.C:** I think Scottish bands trying to sell themselves through an English and American medium have found themselves in all sorts of different guises. A lot of bands have rushed headlong into a sometimes quite sterile image of America, and it is

America refracted through Levi's Adverts, refracted through books they bought down the Barras, images of James Dean: it is all those sorts of things that are culled together. In fact it is probably one of the most sterile notions of America there is, because it actually stopped breathing in the fifties so you actually see Cadillacs, Ed's Diner and it's all those kind of images that are for me frozen, attractive, but utterly consumer based.

**D.C:** Here we are talking about the 80's/90's, which is very different from the 50's and the 60's, when I grew up. There was nothing then about Scottish youngness that allowed you to feel proud of it. So if you were looking at, as I was, Sidney Devine, Calum Kennedy, Jimmy Shand, they weren't bits of my culture that I felt good about, so I immediately went to another culture, which was more palatable and seemed to be more international.

**S.C:** **Deacon Blue**, **Hue and Cry**, and **Wet Wet Wet** are three of the groups who have most absorbed Americanism, although two of them, **Hue and Cry** and **Deacon Blue** have infused it with Scottish meaning, with words, with images, with narratives that refer back to Scotland. Unfortunately neither of those groups have impacted on pop culture significantly enough for those meanings to translate above the American imagery. Neither of them have become **U2**, who do exactly the same thing. Look at *The Joshua Tree* and *Harlem*: two key images of America, one urban, one rural that have been infused in their music and they are supposed to be an Irish band! But, the thing about it is that they have become so big as a band, they've articulated themselves and mediated themselves on the cover of everything, so if you ask people 'Where are **U2** from and what do **U2** represent?', the answer is Dublin and Ireland, it isn't misconstrued Americana.

**Q: As people who established themselves during the Thatcherite eighties 'style culture', how conscious are you of what that period destroyed and how aware are you of its legacies?**

**S.C:** I think that happily, *Halfway to Paradise* for me was a kind of diary of what Thatcherism tried to destroy but didn't, because it mistook those values in society as socialist values without recognising that they are also human values and that socialism is a humanism. You can destroy socialism in a certain kind of political sense, in breaking up the GLC. But the back of socialism is founded on the human principles of friendship, of trust, not the exchange of commodities, and they aren't going to destroy that just simply because they find it unfashionable.

**D.C:** The legacy of companies like us is that you end up being a perfect model of Thatcherism, which means you then spend the rest of your life talking about why and worrying about it.

**Q: In concluding, do you think that John Grierson's much mentioned dictum, about the Scottish psyche not being suited to film making, still applies?**

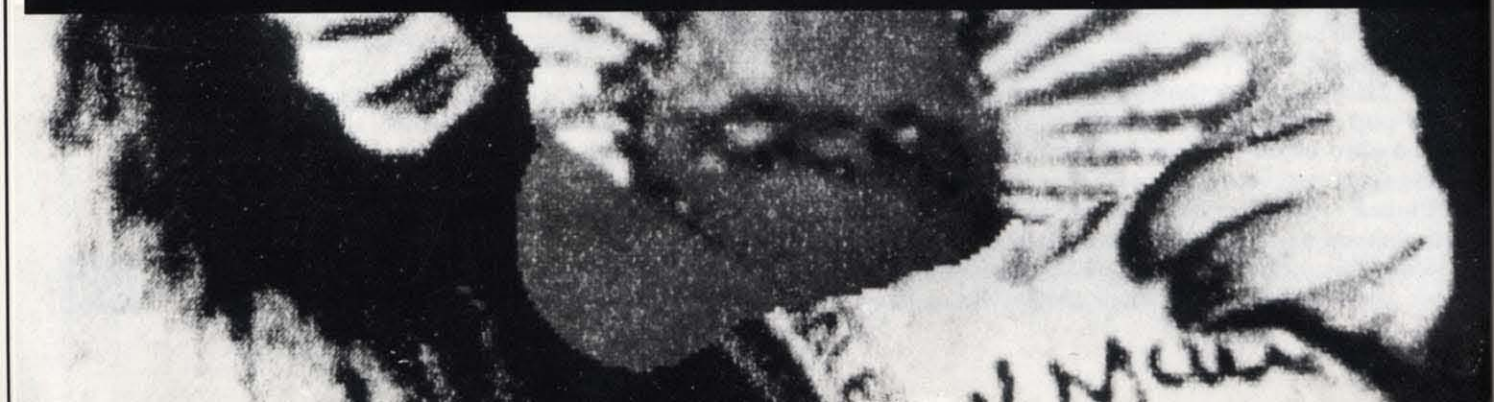
**S.C:** No, of course not. Grierson was tapping into the dominance of intellectual tradition in Scotland, which is social realist and progressive, and what he wasn't tapping into was all the other things that were around. Norman MacLaren was a product of Grierson's own tutelage, but what he produced in animation was very different from the socialist realist documentaries. I want more MacLaren's and less Grierson's in Scotland, to be honest.







***VIDEO FROM SLOVENIA***





The eighties were witness to a renaissance of the video medium in Slovenia. This is not to suggest that we can speak about the birth of video art in Yugoslavia of the seventies. Then, only the productions of **Nusa and Sreco Dragan** from Ljubljana, and **Sanja Ivekovic** and **Dalibor Martinis** from Zagreb were known. There was no 'Yugoslav' video as such, only, as in the eighties, video productions which were the products of individual urban centres throughout the Yugoslav republics, i.e. of Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, Skopje and Sarajevo. The differences in production between these centres was acknowledged by **Kathy Rae Hoffman** in her 1989 presentation at the New York Artists Space, called *Deconstruction, Quotation & Subversion*. She referred to 'video production from Yugoslavia', not Yugoslav productions.

Thus, the shift from the notion of 'Yugoslav video' to 'Slovene video' production which has occurred almost overnight - we could say - does not present a difficult changeover. Furthermore, in the eighties, video production within Slovenia was so radically different aesthetically in comparison with local film-making and visual style, that the designation 'Slovene video production' could not in any way allude to a 'national' unifying style. That 'national' style tries, almost obsessively, to 'colour' the cultural and social artefacts of the declining European socialist-realism.

The beginning of the Slovene renaissance in video are linked to the local phenomenon of alternative culture or sub-culture. This was focussed in the work of the *Students' Cultural and Art Centre* (SKUC) and of *Students' Cultural Forum Society* (SKD Forum). In 1982 these groups together established a video section, which became the basis of SKUC-Forum video productions. The results were decisively to determine the forms and aesthetics of a new Slovene and Yugoslav video art. The end of the seventies in Slovenia, commonly referred to as the end of authoritarian politics, marked a watershed for what had been until then an empty space in art. It was followed by the growth of a new youth 'sub-culture', punk, which provided a non-compromising and critical energy which could evaluate and feed art creatively in the eighties.

Punk culture and its artistic off-shoots in turn provoked shifts in the media of art. It constituted and legitimated a space for new art production and granted a relevant status to diverse practices. It encouraged different socialization processes, and forms of social activity and behaviour, and the acceptance of 'deviant' social and artistic 'realities'.

During the eighties numerous new social movements were established in Slovenia around the 'coming out' of male homosexuals and, somewhat later, lesbians, from Ljubljana's underground, and the appearance of 'gay' culture. It is within this specific context that the rebirth of the video medium and video art in Slovenia should be understood. Video established itself quite quickly as an appropriate medium for the expression of the radical standpoints of the new generation. Non-professional video equipment (VHS), its simple handling, extremely fast production and reproduction - repeated performing of new messages - all this had made of video one of the most popular and radical forms of media for the eighties generation. Access to video became a status symbol in itself.

If we consider video as the new medium for the eighties in Slovenia, we can emphasize that the full extent of the boundaries for its expansion are yet to be discovered. In Slovenia these now stretch from the hyper-production of television commercials, to the flood of music video spots. A supply of the most up-to-date products of the international film industry are now available in videotheques, a form of video black market. The role of video art may be superfluous in European or West World dimensions but not if we are talking about the possibilities of production in Slovenia. In the West a solid network of private and public institutions, Galleries, Museums, festivals, and TV programmes have been established, which also seems to include video art production, presentation and distribution. Of course this does not mean that on the art market video has already acquired the status and capital of film, for example.

Video in Slovenia, while understood to be a form of 'media technology' and also recognised as an artistic genre and an important method of theoretical and critical discourse, is still situated somewhere between the marginal and institutional. Judging by productions, video art is an established institution in Slovenia; but the conditions under which it is produced are still largely marginal. Slovenia has few video producers but no one involved in video distribution. It also lacks a network of curators and editors who could represent a video art within cultural institutions. Throughout the eighties, SKUC gallery ran local video productions and exhibited video installations. Numerous artistic and documentary video projects were carried out by SKUC-Forum; by the Cankar Cultural Center in Ljubljana, within the framework of its video biennale. The International Video Biennale began in 1983 and continued throughout the eighties; by TV SLOVENIA, as a part of its Culture and Art Programme; and by independent film/video groups, who were mostly involved in production of commercials. The Information Centre of The Modern Gallery in Ljubljana, established in 1990, showed several video programmes from abroad in 1991, and might offer new prospects in the nineties. At the moment what we are left with are 'weird' individual enthusiasts, mostly video artists, who with much love and assiduity cling to the field which others consider rather eccentric. Video artists are therefore forced to be the critical and theoretical promoters of their own work.

In spite of the production gap which is increasingly threatening the growth of video production, especially in the context of a post-1991 'war' and post-independence economic crisis, we can say that because of the richness of strategies for visualization and narration, video art constitutes an autonomous paradigm within art in Slovenia, a paradigm which can be defined and understood also as a new economy of seeing. Surprisingly, all that critics berated as lacking in film and visual media of the seventies - the absence of criticism, social engagement, variations in political and social themes on the one hand, and a lack of experimentalism in film and video languages, images and technology, etc., on the other - created a space filled by video. The 'art video' reconstituted and recreated levels of history and of contemporary creativity in art and culture and social activities.

Video based on the editing of various media made full use of the interdisciplinary possibilities of video. One case in point is the video *Mongold* (1987) by **Nusa and Sreco Dragan**. They re-edited fragments from the Alain Resnais' film *Last Year in Marienbad* and combined them with prose by Kurt Schwitters and Slovenian poet Ales Debeljak. **Mare Kovacic**, a current video artist, is building his video universe using elements from his own 'plastic' art experience, intermingled with performance





art and theatre. The music mixed-media group **Borghesia** has based its video creation in mass-culture by remaking the audio visual material used in national television programmes. In 1990, Borghesia brought out a video called *Triumph of Wish*, a retrospective compilation of projects from 1987 to 1989. In these projects, music spots are used to relay visual and cultural information. Frenetic rhythmical music combines with emphasized textual criticism (*Mud, No Hope, No Fear ...*), there is an intermixing of frenetic installation screenplays, psychedelic colours and contents from the edge of society.

In the video *The Moments of Decision* (1985) by **Marina Grzinic & Aina Smid**, the protagonist borrows the face of the actress playing the leading part in a 1950's motion picture with the same title, 'The Moments of Decision'. Within the video images, the story of the original film is continued, but with the introduction of new actors, and iconographic elements. The same processes occur in more recent video works by Grzinic/Smid. Documentary video shots are juxtaposed with artificial video language and an alien iconography. In the video *Thirst* (1989), scenery from Macedonian Ohrid, partly an early Christian/Byzantine centre, is used to create a story that has been described as 'red shining - blue history'. In *Bilocation* (1990), suggesting the residence of the body and soul in two different places simultaneously, documentary material from the Yugoslav civil war in Kosovo is disintegrated and reconstructed through digital and optical technology. The result is a story delineating the hell and bloody history of Kosovo, a territory in the South of Yugoslavia; a place which has been menaced by national disorders and conflicts between the Albanians and Serbians who live there. In the videos *The Sower* (1991) and *Three Sisters* (1992), the documentary material from the war in Slovenia and Croatia was used to compose a story based on the possibility of intertwining the inner and outer world.

It could be argued that through an electronic and digital process of 'incrustation', a concrete destiny for film and documentary material is being realised. In a more general sense, the fateful destiny of film and historical imagery is circumvented from the point of view of video. By the end of the century, in so-called ex-socialist countries, video will have developed into a specific 'viewer', enabling us to read history, to see through the surface of the image, and maybe to perceive the future.

Social and political contexts mark points of differentiation between the function of video in the 'ex-East' and West. The question of what we might call the 'ideological' consequences of video production in the East, the socialist countries (where Slovenia still belongs?), remains. While it may seem that the question of ideological consequences is secondary in the context of a capitalist art-market, the contrary applies to the ex-socialist societies, where until now there has been no 'art market'. We can say that, conceptually, so-called socialist and capitalist societies are 'structured' by different discourses. Socialist society has, in Slovenia, functioned by painful recourse to a *psychotic discourse* which attempted to neutralise the side effects of pertinent interpretations and productions as a means of hiding, masking, and renaming *history*. Rather than a yearning for the past, recent political and social shifts represent a desire to retake possession of Slovene history. Yet in the Slovene 'post war', history has begun to play a starring role in art and in culture, not as a means of retaking possession of the history of socialism, deformed as it was, but in order to reject the blind retaliation, nationalism and racism that can rise out of the 'ruins of war' (a war which took place in June 1991 against the tanks of the Yugoslav government).

The effect of this phase of Slovene history on video is akin to an 'interior multiculturalism', but with international resonances. Through the video process of reappropriation, the

recycling of different histories and cultures, a multi-cultural condition has been constructed. The video image presents 'a persistent searching for the condensed point which is simultaneously the past and the present'. It constitutes the deconstruction of time, based on memory and balance between the past and the future. The result of such procedures is the development of an imagery which refers neither to the past nor to the present, but to a potential time, somewhere between certainty and potentiality. That is why one can define video art as providing an alternative history, which gathers the names and the faces of forgotten or discarded cultures. It redefines their place inside a contemporary construction of power relations, which also feeds back in to the status of video itself.

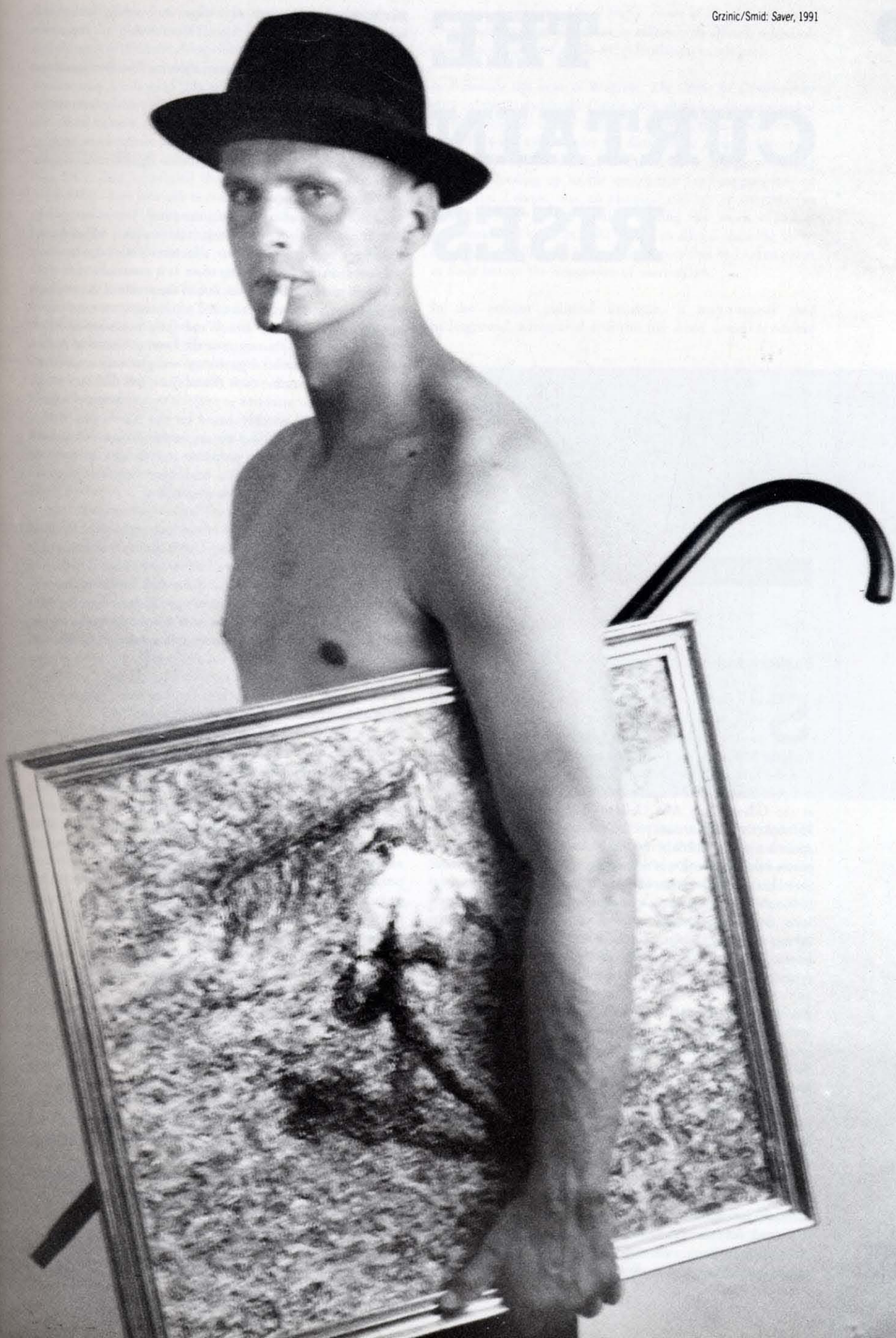
All this tells us that video production in Slovenia is the product of very distinct themes and formal characteristics. Video productions are not easily classified as, say, 'music spot', video art, or video theatre. Most of the projects could belong to one or to all these fields at the same time. Sometimes, a music spot, because of its specifically defined theme, could hardly be considered to belong to this category. This is also true when speaking about documentary video projects - a document quickly changes to being a memento of an individual work, or of a period in time. Video art often deals with political themes, and because of its interdisciplinarity - video's connection with theatre, film, performance, music - is extremely important for the form and content, and for further explorations of those very art spheres it itself manipulates.

Towards the end of the eighties decade, video assumed a legitimate status in Slovenia, mainly because of changed attitudes towards television.

Video is the 'eye of history': non-professional VHS video equipment in the beginning of the eighties captured on video film the events of an alternative scene in Ljubljana. Later, in the mid-eighties and in the nineties, video films were not merely a means of expression, but also a method of documenting political events. Documentary video projects/cassettes (realized by amateurs with VHS equipment and by independent film and video groups with professional video equipment), captured different periods of political and social struggle in Slovenia: for example, the 'trial of the four' in 1988, when four journalists were tried for allegedly stealing and publishing Federal Army documents; the ten-day war in Slovenia in 1991 against the Federal Yugoslav Army; and at the end of 1991, protests against attempts to abolish abortion rights. Video offers 'authentic' historical and emotional documentation of these events, narrated through the perspective of its video authors. Our knowledge is not based only on what we see, but on what we can render visible.

This documentary video material (often non-stylized and non-narrative) enables us also to compare the national mass media, or television's interpretations of those same events and to locate the responsibility of the mass media for particular versions of history and in our history. Although Ljubljana TV (TV Slovenia) had an absolute monopoly on broadcasting information up to 1990, that year an independent information program, Studio Ljubljana, was established in Slovenia. Studio Ljubljana, television on a small scale, has achieved the aim of independent production groups literally in the bosom of its socialist 'mother' TV Slovenia. The nineties, with the ten-day war in Slovenia and the democratisation of Slovene political spaces, are witnessing new forms of investigative journalism which utilise documentary video material. In 1991 **Iztok Abersek** and **Jasna Hribernik/Peter Zobec** in cooperation with Studio Ljubljana/TV Slovenia produced an extremely provocative and critical documentary video about the Slovene war, and about the events in the ex-Soviet Union.







# THE CURTAIN RISES

## PART ONE

TEXT: ROLAND MILLER

### Background - public work

Since the revolutions at the end of the '80s, artists in what we used to call Eastern Europe have faced a violent challenge to their former way of life. **Swetlana Zerling Satalova**, a Polish sculptor whom I met in Gdansk, told me that she feels she is no longer regarded with esteem as a public artist. Swetlana is in her late forties, she was trained at the Gdansk Fine Arts College and, as a member of the Polish Artists Union, until recently enjoyed regular paid work. Awards, prizes, medals, commissions for public sculpture, ensured that her work was respected, exhibited and recognised. Swetlana's sculpture is not of the socialist realist, heroic variety. It shows human forms in sympathetically imagined states - love, despair, loneliness, motherhood, longing. She depicts lovers, women, children, in ceramic, cast bronze, and abstracts in marble and sandstone. She studied and worked under a system that rewarded official artists.

Apart from well paid work, living accommodation and studio space, exhibitions and catalogues, artists in the old Marxist systems were respected for their contribution to society. Swetlana's studio is next door to that of a colleague **Edward Roguszcak**, a ceramicist with an international reputation. Both studios are located in a communal block in the centre of a housing scheme in Zaspá, a typical post-war development on the outskirts of Gdansk. Now their studios are threatened because the local council wishes to give the space to other, more obviously community-oriented uses. But both Swetlana and Edward contribute to the local community, they are seen as important members of that community. Under the old system in Poland, the role of artists was compatible with social policy. Artists' studios there were often in the midst of housing schemes which they improved with their publicly commissioned murals.

But it may be the very advantages enjoyed by artists that are now part of the problem. Membership of the union guaranteed a better than average standard of living. Artists felt needed, they seemed to have a job for life. But past status may now be identified with the old, centralised, paternalistic culture. In Slovakia the percent-for-art in public places system has been abandoned because it had been abused under the Communists, and used by some *Official Artists* to monopolise the commissions, to the exclusion of non-figurative or religious artists.

Even the art schools are feeling the pinch. Jerzy Ostrogorski, painter and lecturer in Gdansk, told me that inflation and a shortage of funds mean that a lecturer's annual salary may only cover half a year's living costs. It is essential to sell work as well as teach, and this is the nub of the problem. An emphasis on commercial art production and marketing is now uppermost in the minds of many artists and their organisations. Juris Petraskevics, a graphic artist in the Latvian Union of Artists, told me in Riga that his organisation was planning a conference this March to examine their future. Juris felt that they would have to turn their attention to projects such as a central register of artists' work, possibly based on the Norwegian Artists' Union model, controlled by artists for artists. Fortunately, the Latvian Union has property and is able to continue supporting artists' symposia and make studio space and accommodation available to visiting artists.

In Gdansk, Jerzy Ostrogorski was less optimistic. He leads one 700 strong section of the Union there, which has split into two, but still represents 1500 artists in the Tri-City of Gdansk-Sopot-Gdynia. Jerzy is frustrated by the artists who come to him expecting the union to bale them out of present financial difficulties. 'No-one has to be an artist' he said, sounding remarkable like a free-marketeer telling western artists that no one owed them a living.

### Private work

Under the old system, experimental, avant-garde work was possible for artists who earned their living in the mainstream, but did their work in private. *For the drawer* was how Soviet artists described this work. Some showed their work in improvised galleries in their apartments. In Poland after 1980, when Solidarity, having emerged, was subsequently suppressed, artists were able to show some oppositional work in spaces provided by the church. In Czecho-Slovakia, much underground work took the form of performances, events in remote or private places that could be photographed. The documentation would be circulated, avoiding the censor, but of necessity it was self-financed. No shows in official galleries or printed catalogues for unofficial work. Today the countries of East and Central Europe are free ideologically and the thought police no longer spy; *colleagues* no longer inform, and artists may show whatever they wish to the public. Ironically, freedom and the raising of the iron curtain have brought anxieties and western neuroses and less certainty to artists I have seen in Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Ukraine. Maybe this is just a passing phase. If doubt is everywhere, and much doubt runs throughout those societies, caused by inflation, poverty, bankruptcies and political extremism, it will be visible in art.

### Oscillation

Laszlo Beke, chief curator of the Hungarian National Gallery, was a member of the organising committee of the exhibition





*Oscillation* (*Oscilacia - Oscillacio*) a show of installations by contemporary Slovak and Hungarian artists in the summer and autumn of 1991. He describes relationships between the two neighbouring countries in the catalogue:

*'At the turn of the '60s and '70s I noticed the interesting feature that the relationship between the avant-garde artists was unhindered by bigger and smaller tensions between the two countries ... Slovak artists were freer and more radical in certain aspects than ours ... (Warsaw Pact forces had suppressed the Hungarian uprising in 1956) ... (in 1972) ... we were able to co-operate despite 'friendly assistance' we had given in 1968' (to the military suppression of the 'Prague Spring'). The Oscillation of the exhibition's title seems to refer to a swinging from one side of the Danube to the other. Originally the show was to have been seen on both sides of the river, at Komarno in Slovakia and Komarom in Hungary. In the event it opened in the Sixth Bastion, a round fortification in the Slovak town, in June '91 and transferred to Budapest in September. The Sixth Bastion was an evocative building for a survey show of avant-garde work from two neighbouring countries. Although a Slovak town, Komarno is largely Hungarian speaking.*

Further down the Danube, in what is still called Yugoslavia, the question of minority enclaves within other nations was being decided with blood and bullets. The exhibition in the Sixth Bastion was a tribute to thirty years of artistic mutual support. **Zuzana Bartosova**, Director of the Slovak National Gallery, and a key figure in the organising of the Slovak side, offers, in the catalogue, an appreciation of the wider role played by artistic enterprise in the political context during the years of darkness. She stresses *'the idea of organising informative exhibitions of fine art reflecting the situation, when in wider international relations the socialist system relied on (the) "advantage" of ignorance. Naturally (an) advantage to them: (an) ignorant person, artist, visitor, reviewer - was less self-confident and inclined to adapt more easily to official taste'*. She goes on to describe how those artists who were unofficial, and without recognition, were most able to bridge the artificial political gaps between neighbouring countries. Their informality and alternative lifestyle made working contacts with other foreign artists more effective. I witnessed this process in 1978 and 1979 when I met Petr Stembera from Prague and then Stano Filko from Bratislava, working in Poland. Both artists had been at odds with the authorities in their own country. Providing a platform for their work was a matter of necessity for their Polish colleagues. Both were involved in actions, performances, concepts. The individual artist, travelling alone, with slender means, ideas and no visible artworks was more able to cross frontiers than the conventional show of art objects.

### Art of action

Another important exhibition in Slovakia was held in the Povazska Gallery in Zilina, in the north of the country in August and September 1991. Titled *Umeni Akce - Art of Action*, the show was curated by Alex Mlynarcik, and it documented 54 artists who had produced performances in Czecho-Slovakia in the '70s and '80s. **Tamara Galy Archlebova**, on the editorial board of *Profil* art magazine (Bratislava), has written on the subject of documentation:

*'There has been no one in Slovakia to record the development of "unwanted" artistic trends, chiefly that of action, concept or minimal art, with the same zeal and meticulousness as (the Hungarians) or the Czechs, and the Moravians and the Poles have done ... the photo documentation, amateur films of the artists themselves, the samizdat writings of critics and the recollections of living artists as well as the*

*works and documents exhibited briefly, or not at all, give evidence of ... real underground and guerilla art, in addition to the officially recognised, ideologically subjugated pseudo-art' (Oscillation catalogue).*

In February this year in Warsaw, *The Centre for Contemporary Arts* in the Ujazdowski Castle was showing documentation of the activities of the *Labirynt Gallery*, Lublin, between the years 1974 and 1981. Under the direction of Andrzej Mroczek, the gallery supported most of the Polish avant-garde during the years leading up to the emergence (and suppression) of Solidarity. *Labirynt* was an essential conduit of information both into and out of Poland, hosting the work of many performance artists. In 1982 I saw an illegal showing there of a film of Solidarity-backed art events that had taken place in Lodz before the imposition of martial law.

In the present political situation, it may appear that underground, adversarial artforms like *action, concept or minimal*



art (Archlebova) no longer have a place in the contemporary culture of Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, or the former Soviet Union. Where there is complete political freedom, there is no need for underground art. Where travel is unrestricted, no need for unofficial channels of communication. But that would be to reckon without the problems facing the survival of official art itself. In Bratislava last year I met artists who found it difficult to accept that someone who had collaborated with the communist authorities - a fellow artist perhaps - could now be commercially successful. I was told, in Latvia this February, that artists who were known to be *authentic* would have no problems in a new democratic art market, even if they had formerly been known as official artists.

Perhaps the *unofficial* artists will be better equipped to survive, with their slender means and concept - and action - art. Certainly, to someone from the old West the scene looks depressingly familiar. In Warsaw the paperback edition of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is selling on all the bookstalls around Stalin's former Palace of Culture. Grotesque inflation has made the Zloty look like the Mark in Berlin in the '30s. During General Jaruzelski's military rule of Poland in the '80s, one of the *underground artists'* tricks was to circulate banknotes with illegal anti-government graffiti. An equally imaginative response is needed in the era of the 1,000,000 Zloty note.





# ***FALSE PERSPECTIVES***

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*'For while men are occupied in admiring and applauding the false powers of the mind, they pass by and throw away those true powers, which, if it be supplied with the proper aids and can itself be content to wait upon nature instead of vainly affecting to overrule her, are within its reach.'* (Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration*)

*'The substantial forms of frogness and starness get right into the Aristotelian intellect, and are there in just the same way as they are in frogs and stars - not in the way frogs and stars are reflected in mirrors ... instancing in one's intellect what the frog instanced in its flesh.'* (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*)

Cinema, after all, came rather late. It was photography that from the mid 19th Century dominated and described the modern world. The Chilean artist **Eugenio Dittborn** uses in his work 1930's mugshots of young criminals, complex images that evoke the station terminal of Santiago de Chile where peasants of the hinterland came looking for whatever it was that they were looking for, and where instead they found their brief fame as criminals. In their faces you seem to see the look of those who have discovered, after half a lifetime, that they are Americans. Their crimes are now forgotten, along with the lives they led back in the provincial towns. They have no names. They are only Americans, and wanted by cops. That mix of anonymity and identification, clothed in the borrowed bravado of Warner gangsters - that is what I mean by photography as it defined the modern world and was defined by it.

Cinema occupied, for a time at least, the institutional apex of photography. In the Hollywood star system between the mid-20's and late-40's most of all, the traffic of images found a heartland around which lighting, framing, tone, emotion, intelligence and beauty could be gauged. At the top of the hierarchy of photographic practices - news, magazines, family albums, passports, postcards, billboards - cinema fulfilled a dream of photography: to number every seat, and to throw each occupant into the anonymous dark; to produce an identification for every viewer, and to make every identity the same. In the inextricably interwoven mesh of seeing and being seen, cinema took to its extreme the dialectic of identity and anonymity that photography expressed for the modern world.

The question I want to raise concerns this history, if only because I believe that we are witnessing the close of the period of photographic hegemony, and the subsumption of the photo and the film into the electronic media. If cinema was the apex of the photographic hierarchy, television is the apex - for now, at least - of the electronic media; and as cinema incorporated the novel, the theatre and the photograph into its own practices, so TV subsumes cinema into itself. But television is a transitional medium: as Gregory Ulmer says, *"Television" then is best understood as the name of the institution that has arisen to manage and distribute the medium of video*.

The lens-based media are only one part of video's repertoire of effects, just as microphones provide only one element of the electronic soundscape. Broadcasting still owes its allegiance to distribution. But video is the core of the new media, the emerging form of interactive communications. So far, at least,

computers are most familiar to most people in terms of the VDU, part of the video world. As TV was, so video is becoming the dominant, if transitional, medium of the 90's, straddling the old photographic and the new digital worlds.

So far, so familiar. Some see the emergence of the New Age global village, others the triumph of hyper-reality. Few try to unearth the trends as they emerge in practice, with the result that the technology appears to take on a life of its own. We talk about how 'they' will soon be able to do some new task, how soon 'we' will be able to accomplish something else. But all the time, our faith isn't in a scientific elite nor in a magically recovered community of electronic citizens: it is a blind faith in progress, in problems and solutions, in technology evolving of its own accord. Marx and Engels had spotted the phenomenon as early as the *German Ideology*, where they argued that the productive forces (among which they number technologies) appear to people as *'an alien force existing outside of them, of the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they cannot control, which on the contrary passes through a peculiar series of phases and stages independent of the wishes and actions of men, nay even being the prime governor of these'*.

This is still the case today. The evolution of videographics appears to us as an alien force. Hardware develops far faster than software, and both far faster than most of us can find time to keep up with. It's as if the pace is being set by some historical engine beyond our control. Marx and Engels knew that this sense of being out of control is an accurate one, as long as societies are divided between rich and poor, and skills are separated in the division of labour. 'We' are not in control. But we should be, and could be.

At this time of change, artists and critics - practitioners - have a responsibility to analyse the parameters being set for video as it moves beyond the camera age. We shouldn't be surprised that videographics are so frequently subordinated to an aging realist aesthetic: post-modernism, along with its characteristic anti-Marxism, carries out a skilful rehabilitation of realism. More surprising is the way in which the limits to what can be done, to what we expect to be able to do, are being built into the very fabric of the machines we thought we were going to do it with.

Take the computer animations of Oscar-winner **John Lasseter**. In shorts like *Luxo Jr.*, *Tin Toy* and *Knick Knack*, a specific spatial system is used, a variant of the Cartesian coordinate system, familiar from school geometry exercises, called polar coordination. This gives the sense of a space obeying the same rules as film space, while freeing the 'camera' to roam around where the human eye or its prostheses couldn't: through walls, inside objects, under or over obstacles ... An aesthetic increasingly imitated by cinema films (*Delicatessen*, *Barton Fink*) - demonstrating again the growing primacy of electronic data - the polar system imitates the monocular point perspective of the early Renaissance, the symmetric, anthropocentric universe of **Piero della Francesca**. Nothing wrong with that, intrinsically. But when, in the interests of 'user friendliness', that is the *only* perspective system freely available; when, increasingly, that is the system for which computers' own architectures are designed; when that system pursues its normative status by repeating the aesthetics of American individualist realism - the Disney iconography of Lasseter, for example, an animation of personality - then we should be on our guard.

**Christian Metz**, discussing the future of film, suggests that *'there are now endless possibilities to choose between, and of those that are actually functioning, each is a self-contained machine which*





tends to perpetuate itself and is responsible for the mechanisms of its own reproduction'. The capitalist system does favour, at its best, experimentation, but once some gadget is financially successful, the need to find a new gadget is dispersed: profit, not quality, governs the production of new machines. So each technology tries to stabilise into a profit-making entity as soon as possible, mainly by increasing its market share to the point at which it can debar newer, smaller entities from gaining a foothold. Almost as a by-product, computer imaging has produced a normative format: the monocular perspective polar coordinate system.

In his 1989 tape *A New Life*, **Simon Biggs** animates (in a style reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's games with flatness and depth for *Monty Python*) elements of Mantegna paintings around themes from Dante. At one moment, the Christ of Mantegna's *Pieta*, with its notoriously impossible perspective, glides out of frame on the axis of its own vanishing point, incompatible with what the eye has presumed to be its relation to the figure. Other figures and groups move into frame on their own axes but move within or out of it according to the axes of others. Meanwhile computer-generated hearts and alembics argue with the spiritualised perspectives of the Renaissance sources for a virtual space that will accommodate both the polar space of the computer graphics and the planar space of the found images.

This is a virtual space marked by its internal contradictions. The tape works on disparate spatial logics, whose incompatibility and refusal of coherence become the work's *raison d'être*.

Processes of anti-raster (which removes the jagged lines characteristic of diagonals drawn across low-resolution screens), rendering (increasingly sophisticated libraries of surface textures and programmable light sources) and cushioning (accelerating and decelerating objects at the beginnings and ends of motions - the Holy Grail of computer animators is the 'soft object') typify the technophile search for perfection, completion of these closed worlds. These surfaces are surely sexually, libidinally charged.

Imagine a spherical space. Imagine a point at the dead centre. This is the world origin point from which all your virtual universe is measured. Calibrating rotation, elevation and distance, you can relate any point in this world to the centre of it. It is a godlike position, one in which the world, not the Cartesian subject, provides the coherence. It is a world that instantiates the subjection of the user to the terms set by the machine. Since the brief flowering and demise of the Kinetoscope ('What the Butler Saw' machines) we have never been so close to the screen. No longer, as in cinema, seated inside the apparatus, with video we are on the outside looking in. More and more we find ourselves sitting immediately in front of a screen, often of a higher resolution than that which TV offers, in video suites, on personal computers, at games consoles, at office work stations ... The illusion, the imagination, is now more of going into, of passage from an

external to an internal space. Instead of seeing our dreams projected on screens, we find ourselves sucked in ...

Sexual charge, coherent world, the sense of an internal space: psychoanalytic critics like the late **Gillian Skirrow** would recognise immediately qualities of narcissism. The sense of power that we feel when manipulating these little images is the power of the infant; the sense of unification with a coherent world; the interest in what is inside; the proximity to the coherent body of the image - an infantile regression, Freud would say. This fascination with surfaces, the reluctance to use hard edits, the need to fill the whole screen, to fill the whole virtual world with full and seamless objects - and the sense of control, the absence of threat: gain a whole world if you lose but your self. The infant as patriarch, identifying not with individual creatures but with mastery over them.

The work of computer sculptor **William Latham** is discussed almost exclusively by the art world in two ways: is it art? and is it ugly? The crushing banality of these arguments hides the most interesting aspects of the work (apart from the practical explorations of programming): namely, how does a computer artist handle the historical division of art and science?

If Latham's work is beautiful, it is because it has in three ways represented to us the founding unity of humans and nature. First, his virtual objects exhibit the patterns of growth and change we associate with natural processes. Secondly, they exist within machines, so seeming to overcome the organic/mechanical dichotomy that characterises modern European thought. And thirdly, they raise to the status of beauty even those processes of nature - viscera of large beasts, larvae of the small - that otherwise might disgust us. Beauty in the New Age assimilates even the repulsive in its synthetic embrace: it overcomes the oppositions of organic and mechanical, natural and artificial, art and science.

But you could also argue that these syntheses are facile. They gratify our desire for change while assuaging our anxieties about loss and disorder. They evolve before our eyes, but never lose their integrity as whole objects, or their immaculate symmetry. Most of all they seem to represent the synthesis of subject and object - of the artist's subjectivity in the object language of machine code and the purity of virtual space. The resolution of such powerful conflicts, as they define contemporary experience - even the appearance of resolution of such powerful conflicts as they define contemporary experience - even the appearance of resolution, is an admirable goal. It lures us, in a world where there's precious little beauty. But the risk that emerges is that we might be tempted to mistake a utopian image for a representation of reality.

In fact, Latham's recent work in video installation seems to trigger a new line of enquiry: what happens when virtual space meets sculptural space, when the interior world is precisely situated in the external? Even the addition of sound disrupts the unruffled symmetries of his objects, pouring out from the polar centre which otherwise draws all to it.

Early in 1991, in the Harris Gallery in Preston, **Marty St. James** and **Anne Wilson** exhibited a 14-monitor *Portrait of Shobana Jeyasingh* in which each monitor held the image of one part of the celebrated Indian dancer's body. As she turns and gestures in space, cameras track the minutiae of each movement. This is not just a technical triumph, nor solely that rare thing, an English artwork which respects and celebrates the cultural differences that displace and disrupt England and Englishness. It also makes a formal plea, in the





fractured impossibility it addresses of reproducing even a single human gesture in its fullness, against the idea of television ever furnishing a total, complete, coherent world. The narcissistic plenitude of the full screen breaks up in its encounter with geography: with incompleteness, contingency.

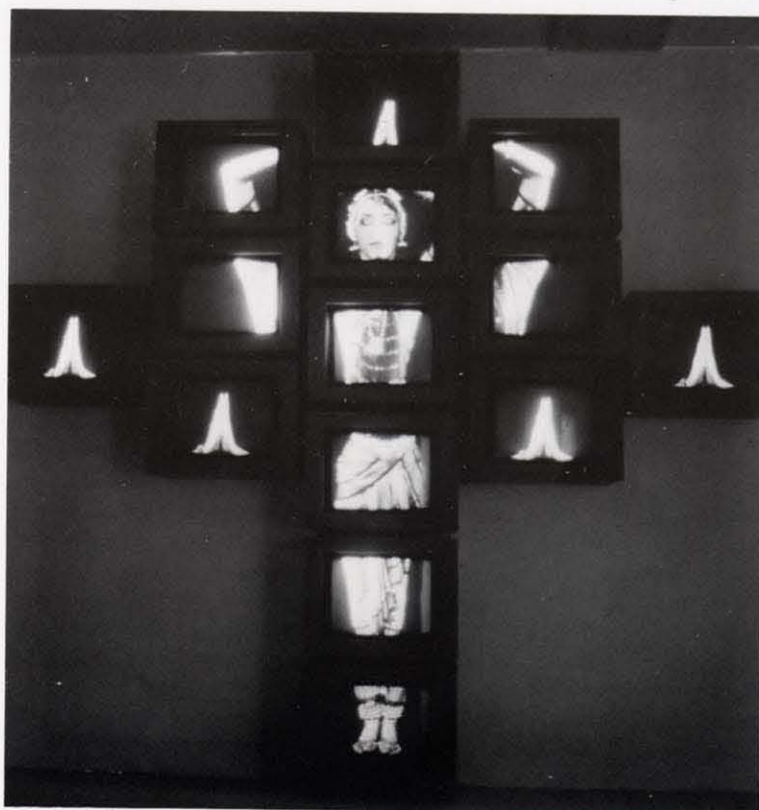
The video *Portrait* admits defeat: the human escapes. Latham investigates origin: the processes of evolution mirrored in the algebras of phase, space and fractals on which he builds his evolutionary forms. If he falls into the utopian trap, it is for good reason (though, as Brecht knew, it is not possible to be good in an evil world). Lasseter simply deploys the computer for entertainment's sake. As entertainment, it risks nothing - and perhaps it wouldn't be fair to ask it to do more than get its timing right and raise a smile. But to do so it must presume much.

Most of all, it must presume to know us and to offer what we want. That's entertainment. It is also management. The new media have arisen at the same time as the surge into dominance of the discourses of management, where efficiency is king, where noise and dirt are enemies, where flexibility has taken the place of change. And where the fall of empires can be put down to their accountancy procedures. Electronic media are now coming into the forms in which they will be familiar to us - just as cinema emerged as projection, or TV as a domestic format. Their forms are being dictated by that supremacy of management-speak, by power structures and decision-making trees that have nothing to do with their intrinsic capabilities, save only that they are busily closing them off. Polar coordinate space is just one symptom, but we have to be alert to these small things, before they become invisible, taken for granted - the horse's harness the old nag no longer notices. That is the purpose of criticism, and one of the purposes of video art.

I wanted to go on and discuss video and videographics of **Peter Callas, Max Almy, Woody Vasulka, Terry Flaxton, Catherine Elwes** and **Zbigniew Rybczynski** among others, exemplary of the work that needs to be done to keep doorways open. Along with sculptural interventions in the viewer-screen relation, they are needed not because art practices are valuable in and of themselves (they may be - I don't know), but because if they do not maintain an experimental field in the culture, the possibility of change is foreclosed in favour of the normative goals of managerialism.

That managerialism is the same as Adorno's administered society, only further developed and interiorised. This requires proving, and the ways in which it has altered in the years since Hitler need clarifying. But the urgency is greater as the scale of capitalism's operations is greater, both in extent and in intensity. We've all begun to accept the rationality, the instrumental rationalisation of the arts. 'Of course, we say, we were all hippies then. Now we can do business. No waste'. But the function of a thriving culture is to make mistakes, to expend energy, to unmake what's neat and tidy, and to kick up a fuss when 'everybody knows' none is wanted or needed.

When, in 1934, Walter Benjamin argued that any politically correct artwork must also be formally innovative, must break new ground, and add something to the stock of techniques that had not previously existed, he did so in the context of an anti-fascist institute. Changing techniques 'eventually changes the function of art forms ... and is therefore a criterion for judging the revolutionary function of literary works'. We think we are beyond revolutions, and do not notice that we are living through a coup d'état.



Rorty, in one of my epigraphs, mocks Aristotle's belief that the entire essence of frog must be in your mind if you contemplate a frog; while in the other Bacon, at the moment of foundation of the modern age, recommends due submission to nature with due understanding of your own role and responsibilities in knowledge. In virtual worlds, we create the terms of our own mastery and our own submission, but the warning and the advice still hold. Do not mistake yourself for what you behold, but do not underestimate its power. Learn instead the ways in which it works, and then do otherwise.

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- Tapes mentioned are distributed in the UK by **London Video Access** and **Film Video Umbrella**, to whom (and to the artists) thanks for the stills. This article is based on a paper given to the Screen Conference, University of Strathclyde, June 1991. Arguments that are stunted here are developed in my next book, *Videography*, due for Macmillan next year.





*Mausolea*

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**ALTAR(ED) STATES**



## 1: The Tomb of a King in the Graveyard of The Object.

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen in Düsseldorf recently mounted a major retrospective of the work of **Joseph Beuys**, some six years after the death of the artist who, more than any other, made the city and its art academy a *cause célèbre* in the 1970's. The exhibition contained many objects, sculptures, drawings and the material detritus of various Beuys 'actions', some of which were also represented by black and white photographic documentation. Strangely absent were images from the best known actions, such as *Coyote*, or the photograph of Beuys, face daubed with gold leaf, demonstrating *How To Explain Pictures To a Dead Hare*. One felt in this exhibition that there was certainly some explaining being done, as a consequence of which, a great deal more explaining needed to be done. Specifically, an explanation as to how and why the process of constructing a posthumous retrospective not only certifies the death of the artist and his works but also evacuates the original meaning of the work and replaces it with a precis of that meaning. This is not so much the work of Beuys as a paraphrase of his work.

The explanation offered to the museum visitor was embedded in the formal, thematic, curatorial and didactic layout of the survey. Survey is a good word to describe this approach, with its allusions to information gathering, to averaging. Averaging was the precise result of the curatorial structure of this exhibition, and a reinforcement of this flattening procedure was a further denial manifested in the erection of physical barriers between visitor and object. Of course, the use of barriers in a museum is commonplace enough, but the point here seemed to be that the use of these structures not only privileged single objects in a way that was often inappropriate, but also radically shifted the contextual apparatus, and hence the meaning of Beuys' work. In support of this view I would suggest that when you take an installation that was intended to be walked through and you put a barrier in front of it, it ceases to be an installation and is reduced to a collection of objects whose relationship to one another is shifted from that of intertextuality to one of archival typology or mere coincidence. The absurdity of the situation was further exacerbated by the inclusion of various chalkboards, left over from actions and lectures, securely framed behind glass and hung on the wall like paintings. But then, in the reductive logic of the survey, each bit of information has the same value as any other. The exhibition is a mere list, a flat collection of beautifully arranged data. A graveyard, in fact, in which each exhibit is at once the lifeless corpse of an artwork, and its own tombstone.

But there was one significant, almost sublime exception to all of this. One installation that was still an installation - a room in which one might imagine that a faint sound could be heard, perhaps an echo of a sound, the sound of Beuys laughing. This was *Palazzo Regale*, Beuys' last major work,

full of intimations of death, a concise statement of closure, a unification of strands from his past work. Whereas the rest of the exhibition felt oppressive, heavy and dull, this room was filled with light and not only this, it contained some other quality - unnamable and inexplicable, but let's call it '*spirit*' - which charged the room and its contents and reinvested the work with vital energies. The room contained seven large brass plates, hanging on the walls, and two massive glass cabinets or vitrines whose structure was also of brass. Inside the vitrines were objects and materials that represented the major strands of Beuys' thought. Animals with mythic/magical references, materials concerned with the transmission or insulation of energies. The whole room had the strong association of those fantastic burial chambers of the pharaohs that we have seen on television. Thus, the installation became *The Tomb of the King in The Graveyard of The Object*.

## 2. From The Graveyard to The Discotheque

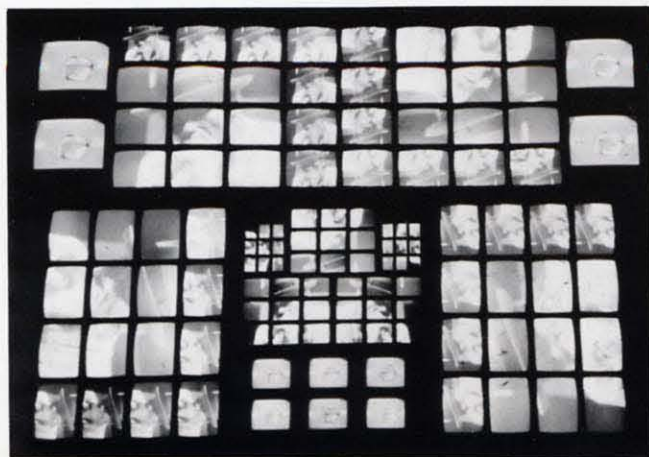
Across the street from the Beuys exhibition, in the Kunsthalle was another large survey, of another artist closely connected with Düsseldorf and its academy, and a long time colleague and collaborator of Beuys, **Nam June Paik**. Of course, any direct comparison of the two exhibitions must be tempered by the fact that one represented an artist who is dead while the other is very much alive, but paradoxically it was the living image of Beuys in the Paik exhibition that most clearly concentrated attention on the contrast between the two shows. In the largest room of the Kunsthalle, Paik had installed a massive video wall, a whole series of video altar pieces from his *My Faust* series, and a wall projection using several video beam projectors, featuring Beuys chanting and shouting into a microphone. On the video wall opposite, David Bowie cavorted with the spectacular female dancer from the Canadian company LaLaLa Human Steps, prompting the comment from my colleague Klaus Jung, sculptor and guide on this trip, that we had followed Beuys from the graveyard to the discotheque.

The time scale of this exhibition was similar to that of the Beuys show, with Paik's early works from the Fluxus period alongside new pieces seen for the first time in 1991. The early works like *TV Buddha* and *TV Aquarium* remain as fresh and invigorating as they were twenty years ago, and here they were presented with the characteristic (though no doubt studied) casualness that Paik employs in his self presentation. Having passed beyond the disappointing *Family of Robot* series that dominated his Hayward Gallery retrospective of three years ago, Paik has created new works that both extend the tendencies of his large installations of the past decade, and re-affirm the simple directness of his earliest work. *Egg* (1991) is a closed circuit installation in which a spotlight egg is monitored by a video camera whose output is displayed on a row of progressively bigger TV screens. The image is not only multiplied, but its scale is magnified and distorted while the reading of this image is systematically displaced and recontextualised.

The *My Faust* series consists of thirteen altar pieces, modelled after altars of European Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque churches. The ornately modelled 'frames' are filled, naturally, with TV screens upon which we see Paik's usual frantic electronic montage of TV imagery. The actual altars, instead of employing carved figurines or religious symbols, are festooned with reminders of the ubiquity of communications technology - parabolic dishes, antennae, satellites and so on. This literal comparison of religion and media may be seen as trite and dismissable, but in these works, it simply works. They do indeed function as icons of late twentieth century



hopes and fears, dreams and obsessions, triumphs and failures, beliefs and theories, myths and knowledge. In fact each of the thirteen is dedicated to a specific theme: Communication, Agriculture, Education, Medicine, etc. These altars are also desirable and collectable objects which, no doubt, will soon be in the permanent collections of Art museums around the world. Without the contextualising apparatus set up by the exhibition as a whole, the altar pieces will inevitably be reduced and compromised. The question is, will they survive the museum if the series is broken up and they are separated from one another? And does it even matter much whether they do survive or not? This question is prompted not so much by the Paik pieces themselves, as by a comparison with other works that have employed similar strategies. Hence, many assemblage works from the Pop era simply look boring and tawdry now, whereas Kurt Schwitters's *Merz* constructions from the early 1920's stay fresh and maybe even improve with time.



### 3. Altered States

The artform Video Installation, at least in so far as it is represented in major museums, is dominated by two artists, who are both based in America, who both have a background in avant garde music, who both make reference to Zen in their works, but whose works, to all intents and purposes, sit at opposite ends of the spectrum: Nam June Paik and **Bill Viola**. (Co- incidentally, Viola is also due to have a retrospective at the Dusseldorf Kunsthalle in December '92, so their work occupies the same space at opposite ends of the same year). Both are represented with permanent installations in the new museum of contemporary art in Frankfurt. Paik's installation had previously been exhibited elsewhere, but the Viola piece, *The Stopping Mind*, was commissioned for the space in which it is seen. The work consists of four giant video projection screens, suspended, forming a room within a room. Loudspeakers above the heads of the viewers project sound into the space.

This is literally a projection of sound, for if you stand in a particular position at the centre of the room, the whispering voice on the soundtrack appears to be precisely in the centre of your head. The video images are sufficiently large to envelop the viewer and the room is so constructed and arranged that there is no distraction from the outside. It is rather like a flotation tank, but instead of producing disorientation through sensory deprivation it creates an altered state through finely modulated sensory stimulation. Technically, the installation uses digital laser video disc players under computer control to achieve non-stop playback of the images. In this sense, video finally vanquishes external time. Video time inside this room

continues seamlessly, at least until the power is disconnected.

There are threads here that have been drawn from many of Viola's previous works; indeed many of these are recurring themes or familiar techniques. His evocation of other states of consciousness through the examination and juxtaposition of images familiar and unfamiliar with extreme contrasts of sound, can be traced from *Reasons For Knocking At An Empty House*, through the subsequent installations *Room For St. John Of The Cross*, *Passage* and *The Sleep Of Reason*. Videotapes including *Chott El Djerid*, *Anthem* and *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, are also echoed in this new work. The device first used in *Reasons For Knocking At An Empty House* - that of intercutting periods of stillness and silence with sudden, violent movement and sound at unpredictable intervals - was further developed in *The Sleep Of Reason*, shown at Fondation Cartier, Paris, in 1990, and is employed to even greater effect in *The Stopping Mind*. To use the term 'effect' does an injustice to the power of this method. Combined with the gigantic scale of the images obtained by using powerful beam projectors, this still/motion, sound/silence switching, shifts the work to a physical plane: a contradictory state of affairs for immaterial work, but an experiential phenomenon nonetheless.

Some description of the earlier work, *The Sleep Of Reason*, will provide useful background information to *The Stopping Mind*. At Fondation Cartier the former work was presented in a tall, cuboid chamber in the centre of a heavy walled stone building. As with the Frankfurt installation, there was a strong sense of insulation from the world beyond. Upon entering the room, one saw a low wooden bureau or sideboard upon which a small black and white TV stood next to a lit table lamp and a digital alarm clock. On the TV screen was the image of a sleeping man. This appeared to be all there was. Suddenly the lamp went out, the TV screen went dark, the room filled with noise, and huge video projections were thrown on the walls, filling the room. As it happened, at the time I entered the room, the first of these violent episodes I experienced was the image of gigantic owls flying straight at me. It is hard to imagine how the work could have made a stronger impact. All of our fears of night hunting creatures, birds as aliens (post Hitchcock), nature become monstrous through exaggerated scale, were summoned and reinforced in a single terrifying instant. 'The Owls are Not What They Seem'. Almost as suddenly the rushing sound, the beating of wings, was gone, and the room returned to stillness with the image on the TV of peaceful slumber. A succession of similar nightmarish episodes followed, always at unpredictable intervals: snarling guard dogs (as seen in *I Do Not Know ...*); trees rushing by the camera lens as if from the view of one fleeing a pursuer (a reference back to *Hatsu Yum/First Dream*); a figure underwater - drowning or becoming a merman, and images of fire.

In Frankfurt there is nothing in the room but the suspended screens with their giant images. If you enter during a still sequence, then you encounter four enormous paintings composed of light and as you move further into the space you become aware of whispering. The images on the four screens are similar but related, and vary between interior and exterior, night and day, the natural environment and the city. Techniques familiar to followers of Viola's work are to be seen: the use of extreme close up, the manipulation of time through variable speed of video playback, the switching between states of still/moving, loud/silent, light/dark. As in *The Sleep Of Reason* the switching occurs at irregular intervals and so there is a constant tension at play in the space which impels the viewer to immerse himself in the work or leave. I elected for immersion and spent two hours trying to predict intervals or establish how often any given sequence might



be repeated - without dividends on either account. The periods of sudden movement were not always shocking or disturbing - sequences of movement through wild landscapes were nothing but romantic, movements through a home interior invoked some kind of poetic narrative - but the most memorable sequences were those that created an instant of terror. Being suddenly surrounded by crashing, breaking bottles the size of a tall man was a shocking experience, and not only the first time. The sense that furious violence is always just a moment away is a shocking, yet liberating reminder of what kind of world we live in.

It has always been difficult to see Viola's work in terms of recent critical theory - one could not slap the label post-modern on it as could be done with many other video artists. The philosophical dimension in his work cannot be circumscribed by western thought as it owes much to other traditions, but in this installation, for the first time in my experience of his work, it became apparent that Viola does in fact address the post-modern condition very clearly - it is simply that he does it in such a way that we tend to look at his work from other critical perspectives.

The switching he uses: On/Off. The fundamental operation of the digital process. The manipulation of time in his work. Do we live in the real time or the Media Time? Nature: are we part of it, is it part of us, does it even exist outside the image? Do we invent Nature? Memory: where does it reside, how does it function, is it simply a digital process? And Reality: does it produce or is it produced by our consciousness, and is this consciousness in turn any longer verifiable outside of the communication media we use to elaborate it, or interface with it?

The more one thinks about how to describe or confront Viola's work in critical terms, the more complex it reveals itself to be. Whereas Paik's video installations/video sculptures exude a truly post-modern sense of *evacuation* which has the disarming effect of leaving one feeling there is nothing much to be said about them, Viola's recent installations, by resisting simple classification, demand a higher level of discussion. Again, to compare directly, Paik's video sculptures, for all their appropriation of media, are basically latter day Pop Art objects, created within and for the art-consuming dealer/collector/museum system. They are not in any sense problematic - the problematic in Paik's work arises much more clearly when he engages directly with media, in his satellite TV projects, for example. These works by Viola do not fit a category. They are not *Video Sculpture*, nor are they strictly speaking *Video Installation*. They refer to painting and cinema but they are neither. They produce (reproduce?) a mythic/magical space, like the site of ritual but they are neither a part of nor the consequence of ritual per se. They exist in Art Museums because that is the situation for which they were made, through patronage, but they do not need either the Museum or the validation of Art to verify their viability. To launch oneself into pure fancy, one might say that these works could as well exist in a purely digital form in a philosophical library in cyberspace - which is to say that what the work does and says transcends the specific technologies employed, transcends the limitations of the Museum and the Art World which sustains it, transcends the physical actuality of its existence as an installation in a space and transcends any category we care to place it in.

In fact, the (post-material) video installation in cyberspace is not a preposterous conjecture, in some sense it is already there. The crudity of current Virtual Reality environments is merely a function of technology which will develop so rapidly as to eradicate present technical limitations in the near future.

The real problem with VR is the general vapidness of the projects designed for it and the almost messianic fervour of its devotees. An artist like Viola, who combines a high level of technological understanding with an insightful analysis of the human condition, could contribute to the development of a critical cultural discourse within this expanding electronic space. The whispering voice of the Frankfurt installation is already inside the viewer's head and it is but a short step to place the images there as well. But again, merely to recontextualise the work through another technological shift misses the point. What is so important and invigorating about Viola's installation is that it produces or transmits meaning that arises from, and may be assimilated through, human experiences which are not exclusive to Art or the Art World.

In a recent edition of the magazine *Mediamatic*, Willem Velthoven states that '*Fine Art makes New Media Old*'. In their A-Z of post-modernity, *The Panic Encyclopedia*, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker observe that we have '*19th Century perceptions and 21st Century technology*'. These statements combine to illustrate clearly a problem, a trap if you will, that *Video Art* has fallen into - indeed a trap it may have laid for itself. Paik's ornate altar pieces fall prey to this. In the end they are little more than aesthetic objects for the Fine Art market, which also happen to function as epigrams on the contemporary scene. But I do not think that these criticisms apply to the Viola work. Its perceptions are not 19th century, nor are they particularly 20th. As for 21st, we shall have to see. It seems to me that certain echoes of the Medieval period are heard in the work, and that these echoes harmonise with perceptions arising in our own era. Perhaps we might say that fear of the unknown has been replaced by fear of the known, but fear is fear none the less, and we react to it in the same way. And the work does not appropriate *New Media* in the service of Fine Art because it resists materialisation. It also uses New Media in such a way as to deflect attention away from any novel aspect of these media. There are no whizzing graphics or displays of hyper-real digital montaging, the images are not *new* or *electronic* in a televisual sense any more than they are specifically *cinematic*, *painterly* or *photographic*. They are, though, *video* in a specific and apparent way. To quote one further reference, Wim Wenders, in his recent film, *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, says of the designer Yohji Yamamoto that he has found his own style and is the keeper of it rather than the prisoner, and thus he is an author. Although the term *author* has been deeply questioned in recent critical theory and is a concept that will be further challenged as information technology expands exponentially, we could apply Wenders's observation to Viola and say that he exceeds the definitions of Velthoven and the Krokers because his work *defines its own space*, its own terms and cannot be delimited by formulaic definitions. *The Stopping Mind* is *more than* a video installation in precisely the way that Beuys' last work is *more than* installation, sculpture or art work. The flaw in Velthoven's argument is its assumption that Fine Art - a context and New Media - another (related) context are the only factors in the formula, whereas there are other elements - call them ideas or whatever which are not specific to either context yet able to be contained within and transmitted through both of them. And in the case of the Krokers' argument, their assumption is anyway refutable from the standpoint of Quantum Physics, a discipline they quote frequently, which states that the 19th Century and the 21st Century are two separate entities which are mutually exclusive. We have to accept there are certain things that exist outside of or beyond categories like *century*, *art* or *media* and that somehow both Beuys and Viola have discovered some of these things and learnt to transmit them through their work. To Wim Wenders, a person who does this is an *author*. Maybe to Joseph Beuys it was a shaman. And Bill Viola says *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*.





# VIRTUAL



all stills from *A Silent Room* by Kathy Rogers





# REAL STATISTE

In this article, the word kinaesthetics appears several times and I use it to describe how the body and mind use all the senses to calculate and re-calculate continually changing environmental conditions, especially with regard to safety and threat.

Most women instinctively use kinaesthetics every single moment of their outdoor lives. In the commercial world of Virtual Reality (V.R.) they have to keep even more of their wits about them because most V.R. programmes are written by men to appeal to aggressive male behaviour. Let's not forget that V.R. was conceived, born and educated in the ethos of blinkered male militarism.

The problem of describing V.R. to an intelligent non-initiate comes down to the lowest common denominator of all - a simple descriptive language.

When the user puts on the V.R. head-mounted display (usually a helmet which also covers the eyes and ears), the world they see in front of them is no longer the world they saw before putting the helmet on. And when they turn their heads left, right, up or down, they perceive a changing virtual, three-dimensional world which replaces and conceals the 'real' space they are actually standing in.

Sound is added to this V.R. world through headphones in a relatively arbitrary manner. Most commercially available V.R. devices incorporate sound as music or ambient noise.

If we take a hypothetical journey along a 'virtually real' road and we decide to leave the road exactly where a telegraph pole stands, we will pass through that pole as if it were made of air. The sound which our 'real' head would make if it were banged into a 'real' telegraph pole is also absent.

Now we come to the sense of touch. Tactile perception is extremely difficult to simulate. How does the V.R. hardware translate the difference in texture between fur and metal? Answer - it doesn't! - not yet! - and may not do so for several more decades. This is one of the deceits which V.R. marketing executives conveniently disregard in their desire to promote the glamour and 'sexiness' of their products. At present, a device known as a Data Glove responds to simple movements of the user's hand. The computer reads these gestures as commands, in much the same way as a mouse drives a cursor across a 2-D desktop.

These clumsy prosthetic V.R. devices constitute a kind of morbid fastening onto the self. The petrified calm of the computer memory is addressed in a series of impotent moves and gestures by the wearer's head and hand.

Having dealt with the current limiting conditions surrounding the commercial areas of V.R., it is relevant to introduce some of the extraordinary scientific pioneering technologies that commercial V.R. has latched onto or evolved from. They include NASA's remote satellite mapping of the entire Moon's surface (and gradually each of the planets in our solar system) and the scanning and tunneling microscope technologies that can cut theoretical slices through our world, including our



own bodies. In biochemical V.R., computer-generated molecular models are made to mate with other molecular constructions to create previously unknown mutations which could be chemically created to exist in the 'real' world.

The Gulf War showed us in graphic detail the emergence of smart weapons. James Der Dorian of the Political Science Department at the University of Massachusetts, in his paper entitled 'Cyberwar Videogames and the New World Order', said that, *'In the months before the Gulf War, an American T.V. news programme (CNN) showed U.S. soldiers relaxing in Saudi Arabia by playing hand held video games, practising the hand/eye co-ordination from thumb to trigger that five year olds learn through Nintendo games. The age of Nintendo War had arrived and, virtually speaking, Nintendo training helped blow up Baghdad. The T.V. showed us animated cartoons of the smart bombs hitting their targets.'*

It is no surprise that the biggest selling 'Predator/Prey' arcade games apply the strategies of warfare to entertain young minds. In this theatre, a seven year old (usually male) child can become highly skilled in learning to fly a high powered jet aircraft, bristling with Gulf War smart weapons. The fact that these skills are often learned at the expense of acquiring basic social skills, such as getting on with friends and family, may generate disturbing long-term and far-reaching social consequences.

The cross-pollination between real and virtual worlds is already far greater than perhaps we are aware. The early flight simulators, developed by NASA in the late 1940's, have evolved into Simnet (Simulated Networking) technologies used in the latest battletank and war plane terrain simulators. These machines' computers are continuously updated by military satellites which provide interactive multi-user information at training and battle status levels.

If we substitute the entire battletank for a Virtual Reality helmet (i.e. head-mounted display) and the overhead satellite for a fixed transmitter placed somewhere above the wearer of the helmet, a continuously changing, real time (or near real time) three-dimensional terrain is projected onto the wearer's eyes.

As far as Arcade Games are concerned, it is easy to understand that these immersive terrains often mimic views seen from battletank or fighter jet windscreens. It is not surprising that aggressive intent is projected into the wearer's mind because of the 'Predator/Prey' circumstances which the visual point of view portrays.

These types of games have a typically familiar mentality, often containing pre-programmed traps and hazards, written into the user choice categories of computer memory. The rationale behind these kinds of narrow choices actively promotes aggressive behaviour and violence where the 'mission' is to attack and destroy anything that dares enter the player's territory.

But we do not have to blindly accept this history or ideology with its limited blinkered views. V.R. simulation offers much much more than this. It is a multi-sensory processor and amplifier that has the potential for dramatically altering how we experience 'realness'.

Combining computer graphics, sensor technology and interactive hardware, the user can act within and react to a computer generated world. The complex variety of patterns and forms offered by the mathematical structuring of 'virtual computer memory' allows graphic representations to be experienced within a spherical space and through a number

of auditory and tactile devices.

The computer models generated in V.R. are interactive, in that pattern changes are made to occur in the deep structure of programmable memory by the user. What is important here is that a multi-sensory interface is being applied to representation processing, eliminating the space between the user and the computer.

The term 'Cyberspace' was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 sci-fi novel called *Neuromancer*, in which he defined it as a 'consensual hallucination, experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators ... a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system...unthinkable complexity, lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data, like city lights, receding.'

The Cowboys in Gibson's *Cyberworlds* enter cyberspace by directly 'jacking in their nervous systems' to the matrix of a global communications and computing infrastructure.

A lot of energy, time and speculation is going into the development of tactile hardware which will interface directly with the user. The generic term covering the overtly sexual extension of touch is known as teledildonics.

Teledildonics could be seen as the evolved mutant of the telerobot, slaved to a human operator, mimicking the gestures and amplifying the senses in an awesome duplicity.

An extremely interesting view of this technological ethos is described by two female Canadian writers, **Lyne Lapointe** and **Martha Fleming**: *'One of the principle projects of a science capable of producing multiple bioapparatuses is the project of the synthesization of the female reproductive apparatus - ideologically through the phallogentrization of pleasure, pathologically through misrepresentative description, medically through excision and mutilation and so on. The cybervagina dissimulates and defines the vagina dentata. We must conclude again, from another angle, that there is nothing new about virtual reality, and that men have been jacking into cyberspace for centuries, even when they are jacking into women.'*

It is the compiled computer programme that corrupts our sensibilities, not the computer itself which mirrors processes and benignly obeys commands.

**Brenda Laurel**, a self styled 'interactivist' and co-director of a San Francisco based V.R. company called Telepresence Inc., points out that *'Since the beginning of the century, people have dreamed about new companions they might create with high technology. Some of those dreams are nightmares about malevolent computers enslaving mankind as techno evolution catapults them far beyond our human brains. Most are wistful longings for new helpers, advisers, teachers, pets or friends. But all of the computer-based personae that weave through popular culture have one thing in common: they mediate a relationship between the labyrinthine precision of computers and the fuzzy complexity of man.'*

At present even the most modern computer works according to early historical requirements and constraints, mainly warmongering, and these limitations are becoming self apparent. Brenda Laurel's approach to human-computer interface design is refreshing in that she recognises how the dynamic and mimetic potential of the computer make it ideally suited to the task of, *'manifesting "helpful" agents as dramatic characters.'*

She outlines the kinds of helpful tasks that cyber agents might perform under a series of headings.





Information - Navigation and browsing, information retrieval, sorting and organising, filtering.

Learning - Coaching, tutoring, providing help.

Work - Reminding, programming, scheduling, advising.

Entertainment - Playing against, playing with, performing.

Her 'human factors' approach is essential for the imaginative and lateral development of the art of the human-computer interface.

At present, our collective desire to dream ends in confusing piles of equipment.

*'The V.R. user is subjected to sparse visual and auditory stimuli,' says **Bob Stone**, of Advanced Robotics, 'which rely on the psychological tolerance or persistence of the human sensory system to fool him or her into accepting and enjoying the so-called ultimate*

*experience.'*

I believe that even in its present primitive state of development, V.R. provides us with a new kind of vehicle for navigating the senses. I am presently designing a V.R. environment, based on a game of Hide and Seek. The game is a psychological drama, incorporating the extremes of blindness and sight. The use of V.R. imaging in illuminated conditions is contrasted by a sensory glove in V.R. darkness. This requires the user, in response to darkness or light, to move through the same V.R. space quite differently. Anyone who has ever attempted to walk through their own house with their eyes closed will recognise how easily they take for granted their gift of sight.

I am also designing (as a long term project, which will evolve with the technology) a number of V.R. worlds which will explore the subtleties of subjectivity and sensory experiences. I would recommend any female artist to explore the possibilities of V.R., which is ripe for positive feminine influence over its future direction and application.





# DAVID HALL

TEXT:

MICHAEL O'PRAY

**D**avid Hall's contribution to video art in this country is unparalleled. Not only are many of his video pieces classics of the art, but he has also contributed to experimental film, installation and sculpture in important and influential ways. To survey his work is to survey the history of video in this country. Hall being a founding member of the video avant-garde movement in the early 1970s. Hall dominates the early years being not only one of its imaginative practitioners, but also a campaigner on behalf of the art which struggled into existence partly through a series of exhibitions held in the early 70's at the Serpentine Gallery and the Tate Gallery, both in London. Hall was joined by such artists as Stuart Marshall, Tamara Krikorian, Steve Partridge, Kevin Atherton, Mike Leggett and others, who moved towards setting up London Video Arts in 1976. Video Art, at the time benefited from gallery interests in the period when painting and sculpture - as traditionally practised - were in retreat and often proclaimed as vanquished forever. Halls' practise is rooted in this period, but also in the 60's when the conceptualist minimalist strategies of American and European Art were at their height. However, Hall has always eschewed a simply formalist or artsy notion of video art preferring instead to locate his interests in the institution - social, political and cultural - of broadcast television.

In many ways, the notion of 'video art' is a rather constrictive one when applied to his work, which shares very little with what passes now for video art in international circles. There is, in Hall's work, a sensibility and intelligence which draws on issues and concerns related to form, representation and objecthood: seemingly dead in art practice in the wake of post-modernism. To such an extent Hall remains a sculptor, particularly in his video-installation work, and to some similar extent he remains both a sculptor and a film-maker in his single-screen video work. It is important to note that for Hall the idea of a 'video art' is at least a premature one. and at most a still-born practice. His installation *A Situation Envisaged The Rite 17*, shown at Video Positive in 1989 (at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool), looked distinctly uncomfortable in the context of other contemporary British installation pieces, with their unquestioned use of images as content and their indifference to the means of representation. Hall's work could so easily be, and was, assimilated into a modernism now generally perceived as depleted in its energies and sterile in its project. But this would be to ignore his continuing engagement with broadcast television. For example, his recent single monitor piece *Stooky Bill TV* (1990) was a caustic glance backwards at the founder of television: John Logie Baird's legacy of 'dummy television'. But the tape is also a resounding formal success in so far as it presents an image equivalent to that first one produced in an attic in October 1925. All the trademarks of Hall's work are present here: dry wit, seriousness, and the exploration of illusion; the awareness of material conditions and of cultural forms.

David Hall was trained as an architect and then, most importantly, as a sculptor. His early success in sculpture was gained through pieces that often stressed the relationship between sculptural object and gallery environment, most usually the floor, thus creating large flat pieces in which the

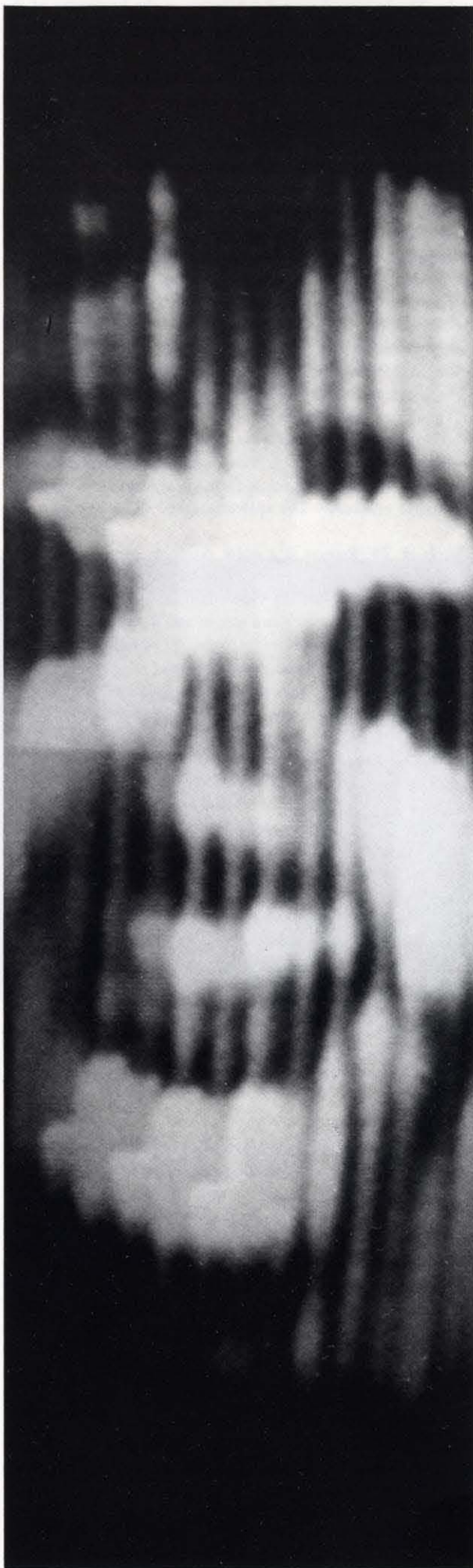


floor they lay on formed an intrinsic part of the work. Turning to film he maintained an interest in the perspectival distortions and illusions present in the sculptural work. More significantly, he introduced the element of time and the problems of representation through use of a mechanical means of reproduction. The first film, *Vertical*, develops the relationship between vertical objects within the traditional horizontality of the landscape, and the elements of space and distance between objects (perhaps a kind of definition of space). *Vertical* is also a lyrical film which captures a traditional conception of landscape. The same poetic quality is to be found in his *7 TV Pieces*, shown on Scottish Television in 1971.

If *Vertical* is dominated in the end by aspects of illusionism (one is often not sure whether a particular vertical object is in fact horizontal), and by a montage style of film construction, *Timeshift* is a definite advance and has none of the awkwardness of *Vertical*; which has the feel of a film made by someone still fascinated by the powers of the camera. *Timeshift* is immaculately paced using non-image sections as a form of punctuation and rhythmic subtlety. Its theme, of time and distance, does not exclude passages of enormous romantic beauty and splendour for example, the time-lapse cloudscapes and shots of the earth from satellites. Silence is also balanced against more conventional sounds and there are moments of structural poetry – so to speak – when he uses pixillation, as in the motorway scene. Nevertheless, the film is a metaphysical one particularly in its final sequence when the astronaut's voice repeatedly says 'I think we're going into darkness now', and then the film also ends in darkness. The congruence between film image, soundtrack and the film itself reminds us, in retrospect and knowing the films and tapes that were to follow, that Hall was to often play on this distinction between representation and the film or tape's construction of that representation. The mimicry of the medium's representation by the means of that representation is a mode of exemplification of the role of the medium as a representer of space, time and objecthood.

In Hall's next film, *This Surface*, he consolidates his interests and sheds his metaphysical and romantic trappings (although never entirely, I believe). *This Surface* is a film which is compromised largely of tracking shots of a street, over which the words render the street images blurred or vice-versa. Thus Hall poses the problem of the film plane. If all of this is a matter of light falling on a surface in such a way as to look like objects, space and time passing, then by putting an image over that image, particularly an image of linguistic signs which do not share that same space and time, then what is posed is the problem of representation itself. At the same time the very materiality and illusionism of the medium is thrown into relief. There is much here that reminds us of painterly problems in modernist art where the tension between picture plane and representational perspective is explored. By using film, Hall understands, however, the difference between painting and time-based visual art; in this case, film. It is also fairly clear in this film, given the benefit of hindsight, that the specificity of film as the medium for exploring such issues was becoming less and less relevant. In many ways *This Surface* could have been made on video, for example. The formal questions of *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* are very much present in *This Surface*, albeit in a rather simplified state. Similarly, Hall's sense of fun (not often mentioned) is apparent in the pub sequence of the man dancing with a pint on his head, as it is in *Stooky Bill* (note the dummies in the amusement arcade in *This Surface*). It would seem logical that Hall should shortly turn to video completely after this film.

*View* does have the aesthetic of formal film in its calm, minimal





style. The image of overall whiteness at the beginning of the film is thrown into representation by the appearance at the right hand edge of the frame of a strip. The strip disappears and we become aware of the fact that the film was 'moving': unknown to us simply because there was no representational image until the strip appeared. Again, this is a point that flows from the earlier films, but is stated here with economy and formal power. The movement of the camera becomes more pronounced and we realise it is moving between what seems to be a wall and a doorway through which we can see a room. The implication is that an image is a matter of recognition of representational subject-matter yet the white wall which was like blank leader was an image too. The intrinsic problems of abstraction are here set out filmically. As the camera settles to stare into the room, the black and white momentarily gives way to colour (we are reminded of Michael Snow's use of colour filters in his classic *Wavelength*). *View* is a retreat from some of the questions of *This Surface* and perhaps represented for Hall a lapse into a formalism which he was rarely guilty of in his video works. There is a compositional quality in *View* which runs throughout the films and maybe stood for a form of aestheticism which he wanted to eradicate. The answer seemed to lie in video.

*This Is A TV Receiver* is a quite different piece of work. It is made on video and interestingly recovers Hall's sculptural concerns. Unlike film, the video monitor is a discrete object. Film requires a projector and screen and the distance between them traversed by a beam of light. In watching *This Is A TV Receiver*, the materiality or the very objecthood of the monitor is intrinsic to the piece. The image of a TV announcer talking about the machine we are necessarily sitting before and watching, is deconstructed through sound (voice referring to a means of its own representation), and electronic patterns, rendered problematic and revealed for what they are - an illusion. The work is a tour-de-force and intrinsically an installation piece, not a tape. It would be pointless video-projected as it needs the monitor, its material base, for its point to be made.

In *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* such issues are rendered complex and beautifully conceived. The tape again requires to be seen on a monitor (this is not a trivial point as this writer rarely sees much video art these days on anything but a screen using video projection). The work is extremely difficult to describe as it stretches and tests the very language of the medium - such concepts as image, representation, movement, time, space, illusion are rendered almost useless or in need of careful analysis and redescription.

Like *TV Receiver*, *TV Fighter* locates its problematic in broadcast television. Hall takes the point-of-view shot of a fighter-plane strafing a railway train and a ship at sea. It is a fragment of archive war footage. We are visually and aurally transported with the invisible pilot, as the invisible plane swoops down, tracer bullets marking out the gunfire. After the explosion of the hit, the plane pulls out of the dive to reveal the horizon sinking in the screen. These shots are repeated and edited in slightly different ways throughout the piece. A hand paints a gunsight on the screen (we now become aware that the image is at a remove from the picture plane of the image on the screen we are looking at). This is a characteristic move by Hall: a simple device to unsettle our perception of the image and its relationship to the representational mode of video-as-image-maker. The visual identity of the viewer's screen and the taped screen is denied, whilst at the same time rendered conceptually paradoxical. Hall proceeds to move the camera to mimic the fighter-plane approaching the target. The sound now becomes 'attached' to the moving camera as

the monitor showing the swooping footage becomes the target. In other words, the dislocation of sound and image, always present in television, is made obvious. Hall pushes the piece even further conceptually by presenting us with an image of a monitor, with gunsights, showing on its screen a 'moving' monitor with gunsights over the image of the fighter plane sequence. The visual and aural confusions barely make description possible at this point. We cannot distinguish between camera movement and its effect of making objects shown seem to move. *TV Fighter* remains as pertinent, and as exciting today, as it was when it was made fifteen years ago. It is a classic tape and installation (a term necessary, I believe, given the ubiquity of video projection these days), of video art, both in Britain and internationally.

In recent years, Hall's 7 *TV Pieces* has been recuperated and shown in various screening contexts largely, one believes, as an example (and an early one), of interventionist strategies by video artists in broadcast TV. It was commissioned during a brief enlightened period by **Scottish Independent Television** to coincide with the Edinburgh Festival in 1971. Oddly, and ironically, it was shot on film in black and white for unannounced insertion during normal TV transmission. The pieces were designed to 'redirect attention back to the box as an object'. As conceptual pieces they do not seem as advanced and sophisticated as say *TV Fighter*, being very much concerned with issues similar to those explored in the early film work such as *Timeshift*. In the piece where a tap fills the monitor screen with water, Hall comes close to themes to be explored later in his video work. By and large the pieces are overdetermined, although not detrimentally for this viewer, by a filmic aesthetic of enormous power at times.

Throughout the '70s and '80s, Hall has carried on more ambitious installation work. In 1978, for example, his *Situation Envisaged* merged sculptural qualities with a critique of broadcast television. It consists of a tight semi-circle of television receivers turned towards a wall, showing all channels. Through narrow gaps between the receivers the viewer can see fragments of an inner screen on which the other receivers are also reflected. Entering the darkened gallery space, one is confronted by a monolithic fortress-like circle of plinths and receivers, the electronic light bathes the wall making the semi-circular grouped objects dark and foreboding. The babble of sounds emanating from the receivers contributes to an overall atmosphere of threat and dull, blind power. Video installation rarely has sure power and authority, stressing both formal and thematic aspects of the medium. Like the early sculptures, it depends very much on its relationship to the objects and the adjoining wall. Hall's more recent installation, shown at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, had a more open quality but relied on the receiver, banked vertically, as an object whose function as image maker is always fundamental to any engagement with it. For Hall, the work of television and video art is one that cannot be indifferent to the dialectic between television as machine and as mode of mass communication.

A renewed interest in his work, after the doldrums of the '80s, speaks of a demand for seriousness in the area which is never quite captured by the new cultural video makers, whose response to broadcast television has been to occupy some of its territory: illusion, narrative, 'entertainment' and so forth. Hall has never compromised his aesthetic and artistic project for such temptations of cultural novelty. In the process of making some of the most intellectually satisfying and demanding films and tape pieces of the past twenty years, he has also given us, perhaps against his own wishes, a body of work of often lyrical beauty and formal imagination.





David Hall: *This Is A TV Receiver*, 1976





# FROM EXPERIMENTAL FILM TO MEDIA ART

*OR: on the  
search for  
order amid  
the chaotic  
systems of  
the new  
media.*

**T**he material character of film, the relationship between image and reality, space and time, light and colour, the perspective of movement of camera and subject, the montage and grammar of film - these aspects of the medium, in all their variety, have been the subject of film makers' formal aesthetic experiments from the earliest years of the 20th century to the present day, and through them they are sought to define the inherent nature of the medium beyond the conventional linear structure of film narrative.

Experimental film work flourished in Germany in the '80s, covering the spectrum from the break with the structural film making of the '70s, through new narratives, experimental film and politics, gifted amateurs, Super 8 film as an aesthetic category, experimental films by women, the increased media involvement of international artists and projects, to experimental film as the workshop of avant-garde film makers. By the end of the decade, however, this boom had gone into palpable decline, becoming confined to (digital) video art with its monotapes and installations, and increasingly to newer areas of interest such as holography, computer animation and interactive media.

By the end of the '80s technical innovations in (perforated) film and analogue video had been taken to the limit, or exhaustively explored - at least insofar as their technological aspects were concerned. Nor were they particularly attractive to film makers as areas of formal innovation in spite of the fact that even today the resolution of 16mm and 35mm film cannot be matched by electronic means, which is why they continue to be used as the basis for many video productions for TV advertisements, movie videos and HDTV programmes.

The potential impact of the marriage of media and war technologies was brought home to us as never before by the Gulf War. The horrifying parallel became all too clear: film makers and media artists employ increasingly perfected technological means to explore the limits of visual representations and effects, and some of these aesthetic, technological inventions have practical applications in the field of vision research - are re-utilised, for example, in camera - and laser-directed bombs.

While it seems scarcely possible to resolve this dichotomy, it is necessary to differentiate between the often uncritical assimilation of the new technologies in some areas of applied art, typical of some branches of computer graphics and computer animation on the other hand; and the artists' critical adaptation of the technology, in the artistic sense of purpose and integrity they bring to their analysis of their medium on the other. Appropriate forms of expression are sought by artists for a critical representation of our reality, which is largely shaped by the 'consciousness industry'.

Media art forms an antithesis to the popular manifestations of technological innovations in the media, which are familiar from pop videos and TV logos and in the excessive use of paintboxes and effects mixers, which turn every image this



way and that and move it around without any obvious contextual justification.

Artistic holography is not concerned with the processes of image construction and their memetic representation of reality; it deals with, amongst other things, the exploration of virtual spaces of pure light, the extension of Goethe's theory of colour, or points out parallels with the complex processes involved in the human brain's capacity to store information. Some branches of media art combine science, art, philosophy and politics; an ambitious project which become comprehensible when viewed against the contemporary media philosophy of, for example, Vilem Flusser or Peter Weibel. The fundamental principles of chaos research, thermodynamics and self-referential systems pave the way for an analysis, astonishingly logical in its development, of complex phenomena and the theories and philosophies derived from them. The philosophy of media art is at the cutting edge of contemporary thought; in this context, we might add the following names to those mentioned above: Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Niklas Luhmann, Friedrich Kittler, Gerhard Johann Lischka, Hans Otto Peitgen and Jürgen Claus.

Film makers and video artists are concerned with, amongst other things, the development of interactive forms of presentation which facilitate the individual experience of film or allow the user to access and selectively manipulate the images, stories and information flows. The USA produced the first cyberspace apparatus through which (using an interactive gauntlet and/or a body suit and helmet which generates stereoscopic images) the virtual world produced by the computer is not merely visible, but can be altered and experienced in a feedback process between wo/man and machine. These developments were anticipated in the work of SF writers like William Gibson and in Hollywood films such as 'Tron'. Media art must adopt a critical attitude towards these high tech developments, often produced with military funding by the major laboratories in North American technology centres such as MIT without, however, dismissing technological developments themselves out of hand.

The German media arts scene comprises artists working in film, video, installations holography, multi-media and computers; producers and authors of alternative/innovative tv, radio, satellite, mailbox, interaction and performance projects; and artists working at the frontiers of electronic

music. The nature of the work itself is the subject of debate, as is the hermetic nature of the terminologies employed by the various media.

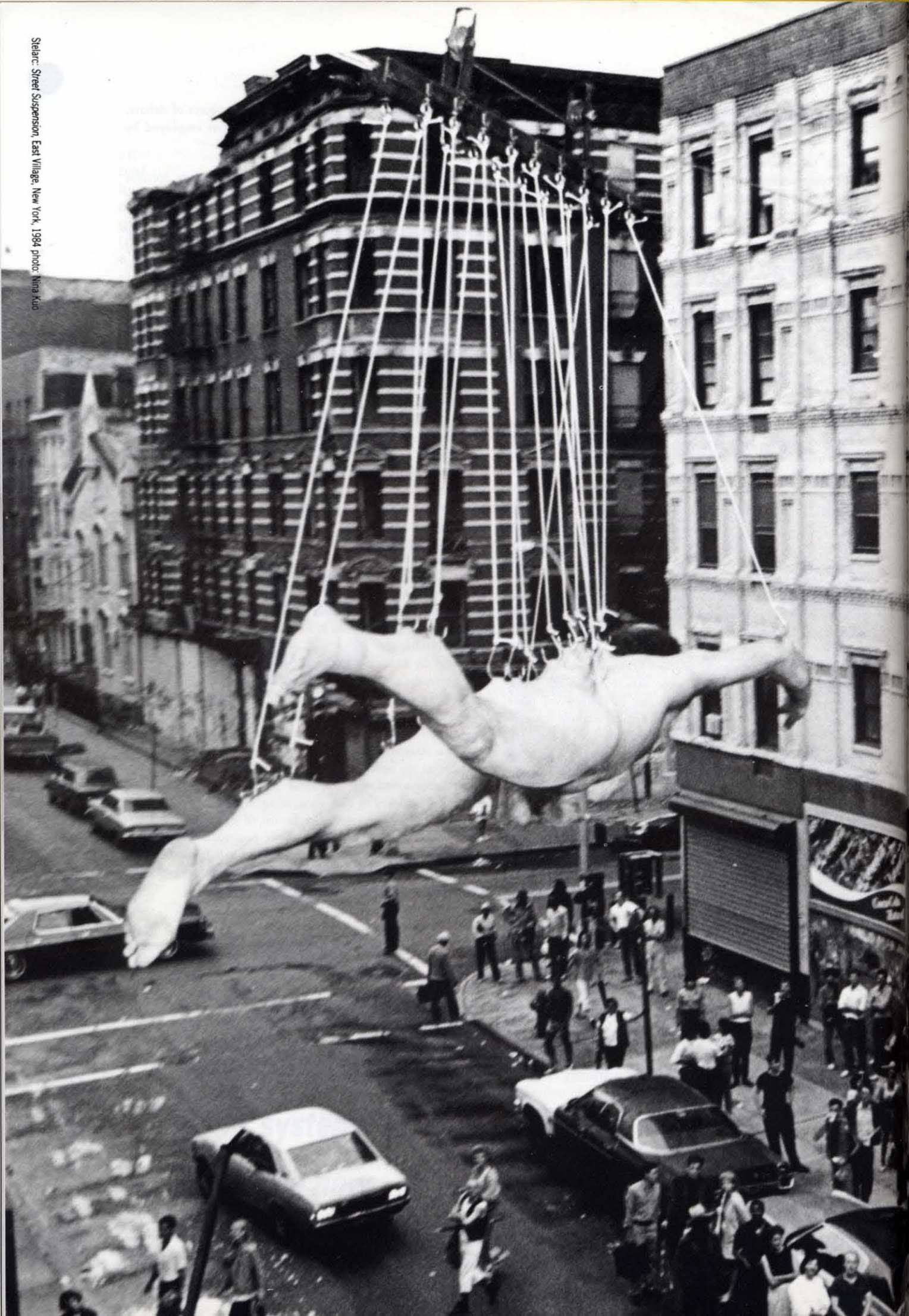
In media arts as elsewhere, it is clear that a crude division between the intellectual order of the world and the unconscious, subjective-emotional nature of the creative process cannot be maintained in the face of incomprehensible dynamic political and economic systems and the accelerated flow of information from the media which regulates our social processes and 'mediate' the individual.

The field of media arts is undergoing permanent expansion. Galleries and exhibitions are no longer the sole social means of presentation. Recognising this development, film festivals have opened their doors to a wider circle of participants. This applies first and foremost to the *European Media Arts Festival* in Osnabruck, which presents the entire spectrum of international media arts; the *Videofest* in Berlin; the *Videonale* in Bonn; the newly founded *Multimediale* in Karlsruhe; but increasingly also to traditional institutions such as the *Oberhausen Festival of Short Films*, with its video and TV programme sections. German television, which has been hesitant in allocating space to media arts productions, is rethinking its policy in the light of innovative programme forms in other parts of Europe, from Britain's *Channel 4* or France's *La Sept*, for example. This development has been accompanied and promoted by the establishment of numerous arts and technology centres and new courses in German polytechnics. The largest and most advanced of these are the *Centre for Arts and Media Technology* in Karlsruhe and the *Kunsthochschule for Media* in Cologne, both of which will undoubtedly have a significant influence on research, mediation and presentation of the ongoing dialogue between the arts, technology and society in general. Continuing critical analysis of media's materials - which increasingly includes the immaterial worlds - will promote the development of the aesthetic imagination which stimulated the experimental film, whether at the boundaries of the genre between feature film, documentary and experimental film or the variety of possibilities offered by television, or again in the virtual worlds of cyberspace. Ultimately the future of experimental film-works depends more on the aesthetic potential, imagination, creativity and critical perception of the artist, than on the technological revolutions whose aims and purpose are no longer questioned.






Stelarc: Street Suspension, East Village, New York, 1984, photo: Nina Kuo







**STELARC**

Stelarc is an Australian performance artist who has resided and worked in Japan for the last 19 years. His performances initially consisted of sensory deprivations and physical stress situations such as 25 body suspensions during which the weight of the body (Stelarc's own) is entirely hung on hooks through the body's skin. He has also undergone endurance performances of up to 3 days with his lips and eyelids shut.

Several of his body amplification pieces have been appreciated and performed as 'new music', but more recently he has concentrated on what he refers to as his project for 'preparing the body for zero gravity': technology aided performances with lazer eyes, amplified body sounds, an attached experimental robot third hand activated by E.M.G. muscle signals.

His recent works have done little to quell criticisms, some describing his work as 'masochism' and even 'fascism', which find their basis both in his work and in the many statements which he has made aligning his work with scientific research, his ideas about genetic engineering and the integration of technology into the body as part of the evolutionary process. He was interviewed by Stuart McGlinn.

**In your earlier pieces there were a number of sculptural elements which have very archaic, nature-based references, such as spiked logs, totemic structures. In the later suspension pieces there have been misreadings of the images with shamanistic references. How do you respond to this?**

I've always been fascinated with using wood, rock and steel, but I see these as basic, primary materials that one can relate to the body. Using these materials with the body or suspending the body from a tree, you relocate the body back in its natural realm, and that amplifies its obsolescence: so the use of those materials is not a shamanistic or symbolic thing. It's rather a structural relationship with the body and points to its original, natural, primal landscape.

As for the suspension pieces, one is entitled to read the images as one wishes. These images have been plucked out by the media so that one gets the impression that that image is typical of the work. But it isn't really, it's part of a string of activities which have involved making three films of the inside of the body, doing a whole series of sensory deprivation and suspension events from ropes and harnesses from balloons, the body totally amplified with laser eyes all through the earlier performances.

**What are your reasons for the suspension pieces? I was always fascinated by the image of the body in space – it's both a very primal and one that's become a contemporary reality. We often dream of floating and flying and a lot of primitive rituals involve suspending the body in different ways and yet now the body floats in zero gravity. These suspension events are between dreaming and the contemporary reality of the astronaut, so it's always been a**





**case of positioning the body in space, that's the initial impulse. I suspended someone else in the first suspension piece, but as the ideas got more difficult, I had myself to take the physical consequences for them and I had to be prepared to do them myself.**

**When you decided to move from suspensions with harnesses to those using hooks through the flesh to support the body, you cited your reason as to remove the visual clutter of the harness. How would you react to the proposition that this visual clutter was replaced with ideological clutter, with references not intended?**

The transition to the hooks was a very naive act for me. I can quite honestly say I hadn't thought of the S&M implications, and I was always bewildered by people referring to these performances as crucifixions or seeing the hooks as suspending dead meat. My intentions at that time were structural concerns, as they still are. There was a visual clutter with all the harnesses and ropes and the effect was of supporting the body rather than suspending it. So to use hooks into the skin with thin cord - I could have used something 'invisible' like fishing twine, but I liked the idea of using cords or steel cable because that provided a kind of line of force and tension, and that was part of the visual arrangement of the body being suspended. So I deliberately didn't make it a kind of illusionistic thing of the body floating in space. My intention was simply to use minimum support for the body; the stretched skin became part of the support structure and a kind of gravitational landscape.

**Is the relationship to science and to research metaphorical or direct, for example in your work on the development of the mechanical arm?**

I don't have a science or engineering background, but having lived in Japan for 19 years, having friends working in robotics and engineering, I have a good general knowledge of state-of-the-art technology. Although the Third Hand project was not an innovative engineering project, it was based on a prototype developed at Wassau University. I did modify it a little. The company that helped did it to my specifications - I designed the support structure and had it vacuum formed at another company. I wanted the hand to conform to the dimensions of my real right hand and had a cosmetic cover cast done, although I never use it because the technology itself, I believe, should be revealed. So that's my general strategy. I have some ideas about how we can symbiotically connect technological appendages to the body and, given those ideas, I'm not interested in simply having a science fiction idea or an idea that's not realisable. I equate expression with experience, with the experience of the thing.

**You have said that to sustain the body away from the Earth's surface we would need to 'hollow, harden and dehydrate the body to make it more durable' - a synthetic skin to radically redesign the body in the future technological age. How literally do you intend this?**

Firstly, the realisation of the obsolescence of the body was a very profound one for me. I feel that we are at the limits of philosophy, not because we're at the limits of language, but because of the obsolescence of our physiology. The hardware parameters of our bodies are determining our perceptual awareness and our cerebral comprehension of our

world, and altering our architecture adjusts and extends our awareness: using surrogate remote-control robots to project human presence and effect physical action in remote locations - the sorts of notions in my performances come through reading scientific literature, through my general interest in philosophy and psychology, and not from an academic point of view. I'm just intrigued and fascinated in how ideas evolve and the relationship of ideas and culture and the technology that generates them, so these ideas are not intended to justify the performances. That's why I don't think the performances need to be described. Sometimes people have been to a performance and not known what was going on, even with these electrodes and wires taped all over the body - they've still asked, 'what were those sounds?'. There's no reason for them to realise that these were in fact amplified body signals. Someone came up to me and said 'You showed tremendous control of your left arm', but that was involuntary jerking up and down with a pair of muscle stimulators. Conversely, they think that the Third Hand is automated or programmed whereas I'm in full control of it. If you find out these things after the performance, then fine, if you know them beforehand, then that's fine also. When I go to a museum I hate reading about the works of art - I tend to want to confront the work and be in its presence and read it without the necessarily rear-vision mentality, without the necessity of referring to memory or to culture. This may be an impossible task, human existence is based on memory; but my desire is to disconnect from human memory and ultimately to be able to vanish, to diversify, depart from this particular evolutionary habitat - which doesn't necessarily mean that you have to leave the planet. It could be that you go underwater or underground or inside yourself.

**Do you see the desire to leave the body or the planet as having its basis in curiosity and is that a good enough reason on which to base it? One might argue that one of the reasons we are adaptive creatures and we have developed intelligence is because of our curiosity, our curiosity might be the cause of our mobility ...**

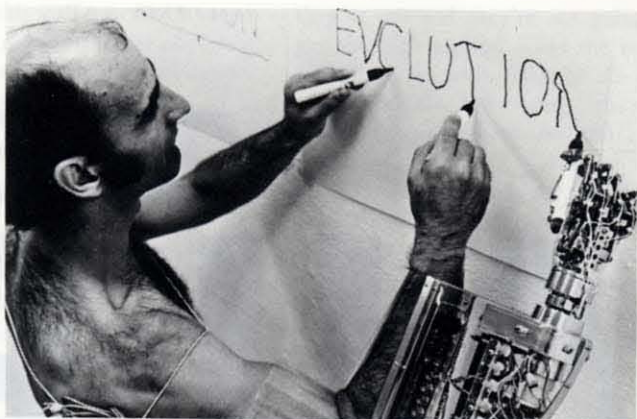
But surely if one is talking about doing without the body because it has become anathema, then curiosity itself cannot be justified?

But in a sense, I'm saying that this body is obsolete, I'm not saying that we can do without embodiment. We've come to a point in our post-evolutionary development where our normal organic Darwinian evolution is no longer guided by factors in this biosphere, by the gravitational pressures. It's now the information thrust, we've accumulated this input that creates these desires to probe more and extend more and amplify more and evaluate and diagnose more. So what begins as an evolutionary strategy, this curiosity which is essentially the result of our mobility and our perception, comes to a point now where that accumulation begins to have its own dynamic and its own direction and it propels the body and fashions it in new ways. The information field now fashions the fabric of the body.

**This momentum of technology is backed and funded by the military and by multi-national companies. How do you as an artist feel about such a direct involvement in and promotion of this type of research?**

I don't have a cynical or pessimistic view of life in general. I don't see the sinister everywhere. Sure, a lot of this stuff is funded by the military and sure economic forces drive certain technological innovation, but I like to think that certain





Seiichi Handwriting, Maki Gallery, Tokyo, 1982

technologies have a 'raison d'être' of their own. They can be justified as pure research, they can be done without funding from anyone, they can be non-destructive, they can be technologies that can be connected to the body to explore new realms of knowledge and of information. So I tend to have a fairly optimistic view. Human research is now about destructiveness and power and aggression and war, but ultimately human research is going to be about other things, like extending intelligence, perceiving and inhabiting a more immense extra-terrestrial time-space continuum.

It's difficult to talk about ethical and moral issues from a sociologist's or a politician's point of view. What I'm intrigued by is the conceptual integrity that this generates. I can't always pretend that it's the right way to go or that there won't be a bad strategy, but I don't feel qualified to talk about those issues, they are very complex social issues. As an artist you can't dwell on political difficulties or social iniquities or else you can't function. One can't function making art at all if one really examines the world and examines the poverty, disease and inequality. How can anyone do art, how can anyone have the security to pursue the futility that's involved in making art? Just as much as scientists can be criticised for being immoral about certain inventions, so the artist can be criticised for spending a lifetime of futile, visual and conceptual explorations.

**Could you explain what you mean when you say that in this information age the freedom that is significant is not that of ideas, but 'the freedom to mutate your body'?**

I made that statement because at that time I thought that in an information over-load environment, an environment where you've got increasing inter-connectedness of computer terminals, you'll have a situation where freedom of information is no longer an issue. The issue is going to be whether a government, or a religious group, or a society, is going to let you modify your body. I believe that freedom of form rather than freedom of information will allow you to mutate on your present DNA structure. Why should intelligence be embedded simply in this bi-pedal form with this carbon chemistry and these particular functions? The question now is how to extend intelligence, create sensory antennae and subjectively experience a wider spectrum of reality, how to extend one's lifespan. I think the problem is not perpetuating by reproduction but rather focusing on the individual for re-designing. Once people are propelled off the Earth, then perhaps the strict religious, political and social beliefs here on Earth won't be as strong and there will be pressures that will make it easier for the body to be redesigned without the trauma of our planetary culture.

**A criticism of your work and ideas is that they**

**perpetuate male power structures and ideologies. How do you respond to this?**

I don't think technology is a male construct. There is a feminist critique that says that technology is essentially made by the male and is used to perpetuate male power. I think that's essentially a seductive concept for feminists, but equally it could have been the female part of our species that initiated the use of technology through scraping skins, and other instruments devised by the female, just as spears or hunting instruments were probably devised by the male - if there was a clear division between hunting and housekeeping, which we really have no proof of except that childbearing may have necessitated the woman to be passified or immobilised. But even if technology were a male construct, its implications and effects now are that technology equalises our physical potential and standardises human sexuality. For example, a woman looking through a microscope has the same sharpness of vision as a man, a woman in a vehicle can be as fast and as powerful as a man. Technology potentially has the capability of removing the burden of childbearing from the woman's body altogether, so there is then the possibility that human sexuality is less meaningful and is gradually erased; that there's no reason to be sexually different other than for personal pleasure. If we can fertilise and nurture the foetus outside the woman's body, then technically there'll be no birth. If we can replace malfunctioning components, technically there should be no death. So technology, having equalised our physical potential and standardised our sexuality, redefines our roles as humans. Existence might simply be either operational or not operational.

**Perhaps if one were to perceive these works as music performances, the references in your work would be less strong and would allow these readings to exist without stifling the strategies which you are talking about?**

What's fascinating for me is that these events have often been difficult to define and furthermore in the last 6 or 7 years I've had more invitations to do new music festivals than anything else; so as someone who doesn't like being a specialist, I also like it that these events have crossed over into the realm of music. Because these boundaries are constantly blurring and shifting, then that makes it a much more exciting realm of activity.

**Note: An interview with Genesis P. Orridge will appear in issue 12 of Variant. This interview is the second of three interviews by Stuart Glinn on art, technology and the body. Issue 10 carried an interview with Mark Pauline of Survival Research Laboratories.**





# DEREK BAILEY

**INTERVIEW:** ED BAXTER

The guitarist Derek Bailey's career has spanned nearly half a century, during which time both the working conditions and the repertoire of the professional musician in Britain have radically altered. Bailey has worked in most commercial musical contexts over the last forty years, ranging from dancehalls, radio and restaurants to pop studios and, in the last fifteen years, the annual 'Company' week of improvised music, which he organises himself. Nowadays widely known as a uniquely gifted and versatile performer, Bailey is also one of freely improvised music's most eloquent spokesmen. A revised edition of his book, 'Improvisation: its nature and practice in music', has recently been published by the British Library and a complementary television series, 'On The Edge', screened in Britain by Channel 4. Bailey has made some 90 records, including several for the Incus Records label (which he co-founded and runs). Perhaps the most influential of all contemporary improvisers, he is also one of the best-documented; nevertheless he remains doggedly committed to live performance - which is still the best way to hear him. He talked to Ed Baxter about his work.

**EB:** Although you occupy the position of being one of the foremost theorists of improvisation, you're equally well-known as a practitioner of freely improvised music; furthermore, you go to great pains to assert that the subject somehow resists rigid definition or academic models. Theory, documentation and by implication the structural mechanisms of recording seem to fall on one side - appearing as distractions, even - and live music and the physiological transmis-

sion of information, in terms of intuitive comprehension of music, on the other. Obviously it's not that simple, but would you comment on that apparent opposition of theory and practice?

**Derek Bailey:** I have the impression that at the moment writing about improvisation is one of the few growth industries you can find in this country. Of course I've been guilty of that myself - and I don't really have any excuses, except to say that writing about improvisation and, more recently, making a television series, has never particularly meant anything to me as an improviser except as a kind of research. For me it's always been the case that the main thing which writing about improvisation (or looking at it in some other way) has offered, has been an opportunity to see what other people do about it. Particularly other people with whom one has no musical contact.

Ordinarily it's virtually impossible to talk to a lot of musicians who improvise about improvisation - and that side of it interests me very much. Even the word itself is totally suspect. I'm not talking about free improvisers here, they're a different kettle of fish altogether, highly self-conscious - either they'll talk about it a lot or they'll refuse to talk about it at all. But in the context of my research most of the people I think of as totally practical musicians, which is to say people who work in the music business, who are known as players (and that's the beginning and end of it) - people like that all seem very eager to talk about improvisation to me.

Once you open the subject up and you get past the usual interview subjects, which are to do with career matters mostly, self-advertisements, to the point when you can have a conversation - then they seem very eager to say something about this thing that *they* know is central to what they do, but which in normal circumstances they don't get to talk about.

And then there's always a huge struggle as to what to say: I have some fantastic recordings of people trying to say *something* about improvisation, great improvisers often, trying to say something that they want to say - they're not reluctant, but





there's this turmoil going on to get this stuff out. And it seems to me that this is part of the same thing that makes me suspicious about the whole documentary side of viewing improvisation. Eventually you never say anything about it.

A very common phenomenon occurs when people talk about improvisation - and it happens also when people talk about their activities anyway, certainly in the case of artistic activities. The people who are good at talking about it produce this beautiful construct, it's clear and complete and it means something in comprehensible terms. In many cases if you know the person very well you realise it has virtually *nothing* to do with what he does. I could cite quite a number of people like this and maybe I'm one of them, I couldn't say. Revising the book was very easy generally because I didn't find much that wanted changing - except for the pieces I'd written about myself. The 'Solo' chapter has changed quite a lot: when it came to looking over this stuff I had tried to say about what I do, fifteen years later, I didn't recognise it as having much relation to what I think I do now.

I tried to make sense out of the fact that the description which I had given was no longer useful, and it couldn't be explained entirely by changes in the music. Maybe you get closer to being able to talk about it when you can practice making these constructs, but the struggle for many musicians - as I found when talking to them - is to make the construct fit what you know is the experience, the *ising* as **Braxton** likes to say, the thing itself.

There's the thing itself, then there is the presentation - and I don't know that anybody gets the two to match. Maybe they do, maybe they just think they do. One of my suspicions is that the people who think they do aren't in the best place to tell whether the two are really matching. I think that behind the difficulties that musicians of all kinds have in talking about this subject is the wish to say *something*, but the inability to say the important thing.

So, yes, the whole documentary side of it is suspect. But that's not the end of the story - it's not just that you get these beautiful fairy tales on one hand and the music on the other. In fact the fairy tales have a greater solidity and attraction than the music. Consequently, the music eventually becomes the fairy tale. That is, somebody says he does *this*, but does that - but then, reflecting on what he's said, he thinks, '*Wow, great!*' - and he starts doing *this*: so they do match eventually, but the matching comes about through shifting what you do to what you've said you do. This I think covers nearly all kinds of documentation - history, for instance ... It doesn't just apply to musicians talking about music or improvisers talking about improvisation. The well-honed, presentable description is generally irresistible - particularly when what is supposedly being described is not so apparent and is maybe a little bit contentious, in the sense that different people think different things about it.

If you get your argument out first and it sounds pretty good, then you might finish up with the whole game, set and match. That's been proved over and over again, particularly in the writing of cultural history. We're struggling with all that at the moment. People are trying to get their toe in the door who've had their feet trampled on for years. You can tell by the attempts to readjust popular culture into a more general, equitable appreciation of culture - the violent resistance that that's provoked in elitists, as they are quite happy to call themselves, tells the story itself.

The mandarins of high culture are very protective of what

they've got and they're not going to let go of it. They've got the high ground - and the reason for that is of course nothing to do with music or the arts or anything, but with the wholesale buttressing, the scientific and academic reinforcement of these activities, over the centuries.

So to come back from the ridiculous to the sublime, and to talk about improvisation, a particularly ill-defined and amorphous activity ... well, one of the attractions for me of this area - freely improvised music - was that it was a wide open range. There's been a lot of homesteading going on since, but it is still pretty ill-defined and messy. And that's fine as far as I am concerned. If someone comes along and tidies it up, well... I've got a lot of faith in its ability not to be tidied up - otherwise I'd not be doing something as stupid as writing a book about the subject. In the book a lot of people have a chance to say something and I have my two cents worth - but if that in itself were a bit of homesteading, I wouldn't be happy about it. But I don't believe it is, because I'm absolutely sure that the hard and fast opinions which are to be found in the book are as much likely to be disagreed with as agreed with. That seems to be part of improvisation's general nature.

The television series is different. I don't feel close to television, which as a medium is far removed from anything that I might be interested in - the whole medium is only ever about 'television'. With television you can either buy the adverts or you can make a programme about something - they both fulfil the same purpose. The *On The Edge* series is basically an advert - for improvisation.

**E: How does self-criticism fit into this scenario of people either wary or incapable of describing the whole process of improvisation? Do those circumstances place improvisation in a central area at the core of creativity? Or are musicians typically largely unself-conscious when it comes to improvisation?**

**D:** If you mean by self-criticism placing a value on the activity, I'm not sure; but speaking personally, it doesn't come into it, because I never found any shortage of criticism coming from other people about what I do - so I don't feel a need for any extra provided by myself. But generally speaking improvisation is not something that has a 'quality'. There's not good improvisation or bad improvisation. It might produce good or bad music, so in that way it may reflect on people being good or bad improvisers, but I don't actually think that that is the case. There might be all kinds of reasons for their producing bad music. And certainly I think it might be possible for people who are *not* practised improvisers to produce very good music through improvisation. I don't feel that the idea of whether improvisation is 'good' or not would be very useful. The headline on the label would say something like '*the most basic human artistic creative force there is ...*' so as a source of making music, it's got a lot going for it.

Improvisation anyway is a very basic instinct. Nothing survives without improvisation. So really there's no question about it being good or bad. I don't weigh it up qualitatively. I just find it extraordinary that it's not recognised as the most productive single element in music-making of all kinds, with one or two glaring exceptions.

**E: How and why has your own playing developed over the last ten or fifteen years?**

**D:** The changes are not stylistic so much as to do with the





nuts and bolts of doing it. As to the reasons for playing solo - now I *am* making a qualitative statement about improvisation - it is not a very high grade of improvisation. It seems to me that improvisation is at its best when people play together. Solo improvisation is little more than a novelty, but there are still certain things that it can offer. In my case what it offers is a way of looking at the stuff you're using, seeing how it changes and then deciding whether it is material that is *musical*: for me this is perhaps the most important element of solo playing. One reason for playing solo is that it provides a continuity, a continuity that doesn't rely on structured occasions, on gigs, or on reputation, outside of the performance situation - and you are in control of *when* you do it. The other reason is that, if you're doing what I've always tried to do, which is to construct something that lends itself to malleability, and to keep it in a state of flux, unfixed, it seems to be the best way of examining what you do. Things become fixed, so solo playing provides this continuous working through - you can dump the elements that have become fixed. I find that with playing there's a kind of implosion that operates. I start playing a thing faster and faster till I can't play it anymore - the death throes of something I felt was useful at one time. The thing that has changed, then, is the superstructure of the two purposes provided by solo performance.

**E: Playing with others is of paramount importance, then, and implies the creation or probing of some social structure. How does the audience figure in the structure which arises - particularly in terms of the productive forces that comprise a performance? Is an audience strictly necessary?**

D: In music it's customary to the point where it almost seems a necessity to make some kind of golden god out of the audience. You have to be very careful about saying, *'Well fuck the audience! I can get on without the audience!'* I don't know how a painter would feel about having to do his work in front of two hundred people. All kinds of considerations would arise - variety, for instance. The boredom threshold of a group of people gets lower the larger the group. Having painted a certain amount of red, then noticing that another forty-five people have drifted in, he'd better get over to doing a bit of blue! Things like this are not conscious decisions of anyone playing in front of an audience, but I don't know anyone not affected by them either. And it seems that in the freely improvised music area the people who've played it longest are more conscious of audiences than people who've not played it for a long time. Of course, the economic viability is totally dependent on this *body* of witnesses - and it's not the witnesses, it's the body that counts, because nobody's happy, it seems, with, say, a three-piece audience. Virtually every music seems to be judged on the basis of its ability to draw in hundreds, thousands - even tens of thousands.

So there's a lot to say about the audience and I'll do my lip-service too: I *like* audiences. No, I'll change that. I don't have to go so far as that - but groups of listeners provide a really incalculable asset to the music. I'm in the process of putting a recording out, with **Louis Moholo, Thebe Lipere** and myself, a completely unedited live recording (within the time restrictions of the compact disc). There's people ordering drinks and so on - it's recorded by someone who had a table near the band. And I like it very much. Part of what I like is the music and part is the social feeling of it - which is not something that you can construct, but it does happen. And it is down to people having a group of listeners, people who are interested in what you are doing.

This leads to this thing that seems to irritate people when I've said it before: as a listener to improvised music, I almost don't care what the style is, or who the people are, I just like to hear a bunch of people improvising together; and what I like is the *sound* of them making music - and that's something which is more naked with freely improvised music than other forms. The whole thing is totally naked - and maybe it is at its most revealed when it's not working very well. *If you're interested in it, in music-making, then how good or bad the music is, is a bonus.* Of course if what you're interested in is some bimbos shaking their arses and singing some pretty little song, then leave improvised music alone. It doesn't offer many of the things people come to music for; but then many of the people who come to music are not interested in the *music*. Further, most of the people who listen to music in the world now don't go out to live music: they listen to their furniture instead. There are people who think of themselves as 'music lovers' who never go to live music - which seems to be one of the tests for me.

**E: When playing, does the resistance (if any) of the audience constitute a productive factor? Is resistance constructive? You seem to work in an area where you resist documentation, knee-jerk expectations, academic structures and so on.**

D: You're accusing me of a kind of puritanism. Well ... I don't know. I don't think about these matters except in interview situations like this. To put it at its most basic, I'm a 62 year old guitar player pursuing a somewhat unorthodox career in a militantly orthodox society. But apart from my age, it's never seemed different, even when I played conventional music. I worked in the band business, so-called, largely in the pre-rock & roll era, where for a working musician - as long as you provided what was essentially musical wall paper, in a dance hall or in a nightclub - there was actually a comparatively large amount of freedom. The music was functional and it could provide this function without having to supply particular details. For instance, if you played in a dance hall in 1955 you could play virtually anything as long as these characters, the dancers, could swan around. Within that there were certain other refinements. There were usually two bands, and if you played in the little band - well, nobody danced to the little band anyway: they were all up in the balcony, transacting various alcoholic and sexual agreements behind the pillars. At that point you were just functional - they hadn't thought of tapes - and nobody was bothered about what you played. This was actually a better situation, much freer than now when one is confined by all sorts of things, like reputation. Going back, I was not interested in freely improvised music at all, but rather in things that were perhaps unorthodox - but still doing the job - as many people were. That world, which was a large world of largely functional music, encompassed all kinds of musicians - but really it's not possible to give you now a clear idea of what it was. For a working musician it must be totally different nowadays, I assume. I don't know because I've not thought of myself as a working musician in that sense for 25 years - I mean I used to be a musical labourer or whatever it was: it was fine by me; and if you could freeze frame time, I think 1958 would do for me. I've got nothing against those times: I didn't leave them, they left me.

After all this rigmarole, what I really wanted to say was that if you were playing in a pub or club or dancehall in the mid-'50s, in many circumstances you could get away with whatever you wanted to play - or whatever you were likely to want to play. Ten years later, virtually every note you played would





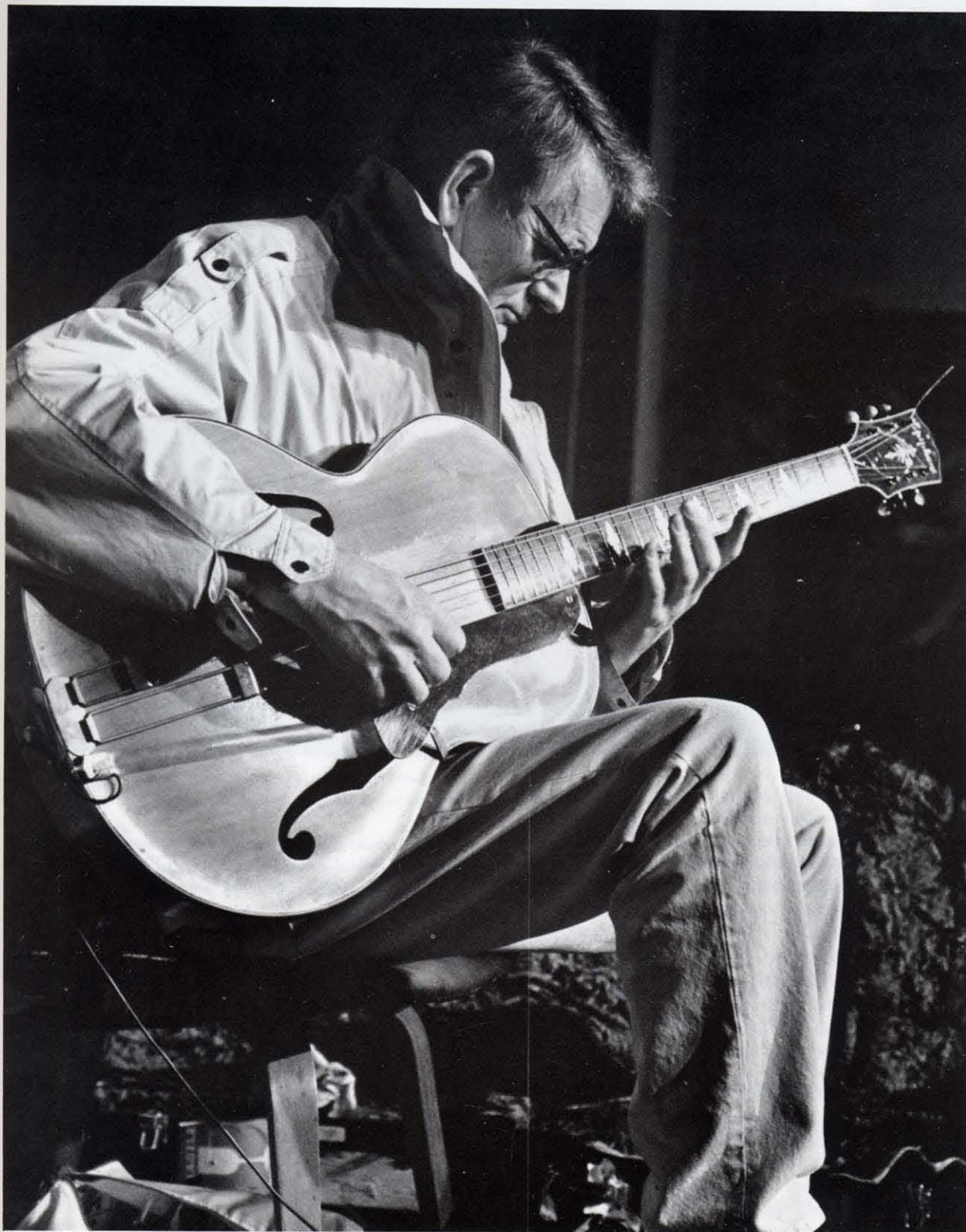
have to fulfil quite strict requirements, in almost every detail. By that time people who listened to popular music wanted reproductions of recorded examples. So the whole freedom had gone out of that business. Anyway, I found that when I was first a musician - at the beginning of the 1950s - it was okay for me. But I was always looking to do within that freedom things that wouldn't be expected. They weren't unacceptable, but they were perhaps unexpected. So this business of pursuing an unorthodox career in a militantly orthodox society has always been the same.

To start to be a musician is rather an odd thing, at least for somebody with my background. There were musicians in my

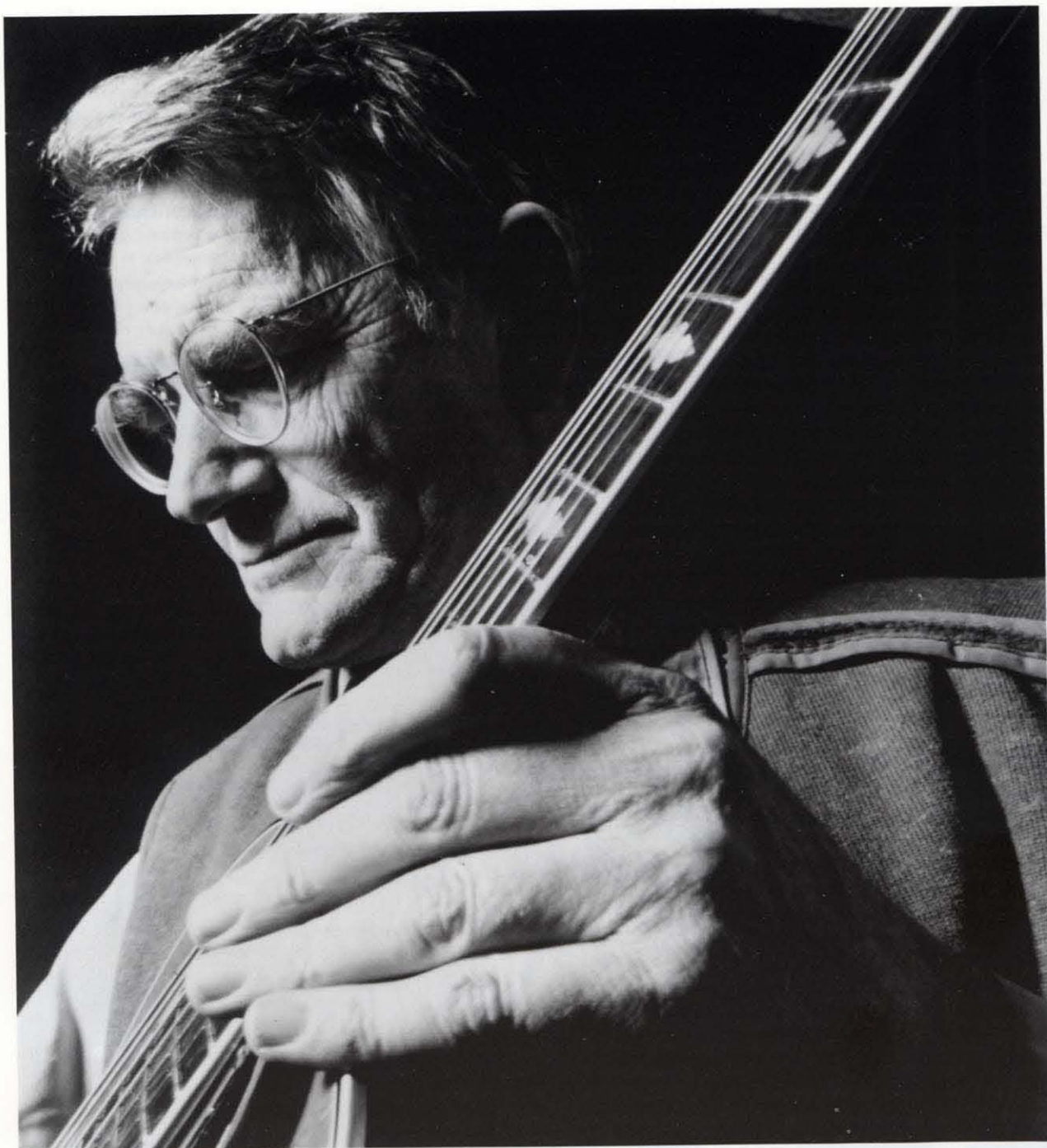
family actually, but most males in my family worked in the Works: the upper reaches of the family worked in shops, cobblers' shops and things, the rest were in the Steel Works. I don't know whether all that has been a training - a looking for resistance to push against, if that's what you're suggesting. Maybe - but I've always been pretty much the same.

**E: About your early career - you've implied that the apparent change in direction that you took was actually a fairly logical step.**

**D:** With somebody my age you have to be more specific than 'early career'. You know, there's a lot of it.







**E: Well, was there a period which constituted the cusp between the days of functional music and free improvisation?**

**D:** In the band business, as I say, I could do virtually most things that I wanted to do - and in those days it wasn't unusual to meet musicians playing something which is best described as 'free music', as a matter of fact. It was never of any attraction to me at that time. There were many other attractions to it, though. I used to love to live in the provinces, to change cities every so often - which was an integral part of that kind of work. You had to do it, but I used to *like* it. But it gradually became a trade you couldn't pursue: you became redundant - not as a musician, but the jobs changed and you turned to other things. So I finished up in the studios.

At that point I realised that this was not what I'd become a musician to do. I didn't like the studios at all. So the freedoms had disappeared virtually entirely. That would be in the early

1960s, and about '63-'65 I was very fortunate to meet a couple of younger musicians - **Gavin Bryars** and **Tony Oxley** - who were connected to certain things that were happening around then, specifically indeterminate composition and free jazz. And I was lucky enough to work with these guys for approaching three years, starting in 1963. During that time, I moved from being whatever I was in 1963 to being somebody who was pursuing freely improvised music. We didn't start by playing improvisations: it was, I suppose, 'contemporary jazz' at that time. (Incidentally, it still seems to be contemporary jazz 30 years later. In fact, it seems to be 'avant garde jazz' now.) Around 1965, when we started playing freely improvised pieces, we found that that was the way we could best work together to combine our different appetites and curiosities and searches.

I was looking for somewhere to go, I think, and I met two people who were definitely going somewhere - and I thought I'd tag along with them. So that's how that happened.



Then I was fortunate enough to meet a whole host of musicians who came to this music as their first music, in a way. They were very special players and they still are. People like **John Stevens, Evan Parker, Han Bennink, Peter Brotzmann** ... all those people. Whatever it was that they had in common, they had certain characteristics as musicians that I hadn't met before, and this was a revelation to me. It was great to have the chance to work with these characters ... So, I'm accepting no blame for anything! I was fortunate to bump into these people who were doing this thing in the '60s - but I am of course essentially from the '40s!

**E: Was Incus Records, a company with some historical importance as 'the first independent musician-run label in Britain', established consciously to document material you thought might otherwise be lost?**

**D:** I suppose so. The idea for Incus Records came from Tony Oxley. He came to me with a suggestion that we should start a record company; not only that, he'd actually got a guy who would put up the money for the first record. It wasn't something I found immediately attractive. At that time we were making quite a lot of records as a matter of fact, sometimes for major companies: but there were certain things not satisfactory about that situation. Starting a record company was not something that I found particularly attractive, but Evan Parker, I knew, would like to do that. So the three of us started it - but again I have to say that I was kind of more or less dragged along by the other two. Subsequently they both left, at different times: Tony left first, then Evan. In both cases there were all kinds of reasons for it. One of the central reasons, I believe, is that it no longer fitted in with, let's say, the way they wanted to pursue their careers. They didn't want this business of carrying boxes up and down stairs, writing labels and so on.

Strangely enough, I went from a position of not being attracted to it at all to the point where now - well, to say you love your record company is putting it a bit strong! But the whole idea I really like. I like even to organise, if possible, my own concerts. And while that's a necessity in this country at least, I've also come to like it. And I like the whole business of this cottage industry thing - I've come to like it more. Maybe it's the changes outside more than the changes in me. And there is an element again of Fuck 'em. So I'm quite happy to carry on, as long as I can, carrying boxes up and down stairs. But I think in the cases of the other two - they no longer had time for that in some respects. There are lots of other reasons, but I'll leave them to give those other reasons.

Now Incus Records has become something that I'd never expected. But you see the situation now is different - the way the record company works and the way the recording industry works. Incus started in 1970 - and 1992 is probably more like 1892 than it is like 1970. I think that running your own record company at this time is, as the Americans say, a real neat thing to be doing. I like it very much.

**E: Do you have any interest in the structures provided by tape, the concrete or rock aesthetics that it enables?**

**D:** Recording as an aesthetic adjunct to music? Yes, I think it's okay. It's not something that I pursue particularly, except that I'm a glutton for recording these days. I'm trying to get four CDs out at the moment - I'd like to do eight. I don't use recording techniques as part of what I do so much nowadays - I used to in solo performances but I don't now.

This question allows me to make a point that I want to make actually concerning an assumption about this book that I wrote. It's largely a collection of other people's words and opinions. When it comes to the subject of recording, I rehearse all the usual arguments against recording and then I state those for. But I've been accused over this very thing: this guy was interviewing me on the radio in New York and he said, 'You're some kind of hypocrite'. Anyway, they dragged me off him ... He said that I'd said in the book that recording made no sense with improvisation. But I was just presenting the arguments. This happens with the book all the time - I'm accused of things, particularly by people who haven't read it or who had a copy once that somebody has since stolen or something - of saying things that I haven't, in fact, said.

Recording is just part of music. The whole debate about whether you should record improvisation seems irrelevant - and a bit parochial in that it carries on in all kinds of music anyway. What you lose when you record improvised music is everything - but you're putting out a record, you're not putting out improvised music. As for as the debate around improvised music versus recording - well, my attention span gets very short. Recording is just an adjunct of being a musician as far as I'm concerned. It makes enough sense to continue doing it. If people stop buying the records, I'll stop making them.

**E: How do you approach your main tool for improvising, the guitar, which constitutes a precise and historically-loaded structure?**

**D:** It's a remarkable instrument, isn't it? I've never understood particularly the necessity to literally deconstruct the guitar, as many free players do. I've done that in the past at times, but I've never found it very useful, in that it then seems to me to become the music. That is, if you turn it into a sound-producing object - which it lends itself to - then very often it does produce a particular sound, variable though it might be; whereas the guitar itself is a central instrument in all kinds of music - from the highest to the lowest, as they say. It's amazing: a really instrumental instrument. You can do what you like with it.

As for myself, I didn't find any of the standard ways of playing - in the styles provided by jazz, classical or rock - very useful when it came to playing freely improvised music. But this is to do with the people I have played with, what they play establishes the context in which I play. Whatever technical abilities or knowledge I had on the instrument were useless - it was simply incongruous to play a bit of be-bop or Bach when playing with two people whose music had stemmed from a combination of Messiaen and Albert Ayler.

I had to find some way which seemed to make sense and which was acceptable to the other people. And that's the whole story really, because after I played with those people, then playing with others set up other requirements - and again I'd look for ways of playing that would meet the requirements of the new situation. I still feel it's the same now. And I still find that attractive - to go in there and try and sort out what the fuck to do.

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# Review

## DAMIEN HIRST: INTERNAL AFFAIRS

ICA, London, 12 December 1991 - 2 February 1992

**I** want a glimpse of an idea of what it's like to die.' Thus Damien Hirst, for whom a long-term sentence at Goldsmiths evidently did not provide as deathlike an experience as he'd have liked. No doubt his transfer from the academy to the Art World proper will satisfy his cravings.

*Internal Affairs* is a depressing show, depressing from the moment you encounter Hirst lapel badges alongside Art & Language knick-knacks and situ-memorabilia in the ICA foyer to the moment when you sit down in the cafe to digest the indigestible waffle that has been written about the 'central figure in the emergence of a new generation of highly intelligent, enviably self-confident conceptual artists'. The literature which accompanies the show, ranging from the hard-back catalogue through the 'exhibition guide' (published, amusingly, under the heading of 'ICA Education') to the notices in the service-industry magazines, has made of Hirst a 'complex' and 'important' artistic figure.

In truth, his importance is purely symptomatic. He's someone in the right place at the right time, and while a few of us will be asking how it is he got here (to the ICA, in particular, the workings of which are always intriguing), the rest will comprehend him first and foremost as an emblematic contemporary figure - Thatcher's Child in the Age of AIDS.

Hirst was one of the prime movers (and, judging by the work, the only one not committed to formal conservatism) behind the cleverish *Freeze* and *Modern Medicine* shows. Hailed at the time (1989, 1990) as steps forward, these rather incoherent group shows were actually trivial, hopelessly compromised farragos of nonsense which served only to promote a few individual artists and critics - dragging the latter south of the Thames for the first time since the days of Ruskin and hurling the former, predictably, onto the north bank and into its galleries. So it goes. At least the political economy of such transactions is more clearly defined than in former times, even if the end result is as torpid as ever.

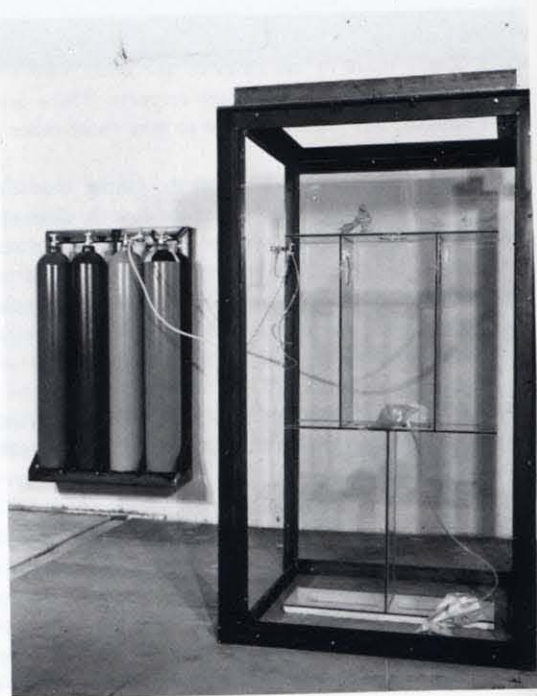
Hirst's work is essentially morbid, with ponderous representations of the sealed body, clinical tableaux of a vertiginous blandness. The morbidity is of a particular sort, though: far-removed from the gnostic fascist tendencies of the dreary so-called industrial subculture, it's twee and above all sexless. This in itself might be expected to be alarmingly interesting, but Raymond Roussel he ain't. A certain coyness is in evidence: more Mills & Boon than Ed Kienholz, more Government Condom Advert than Excremental Culture, this is kitsch puffed up as the new sensation. Why the ICA should want to promote this technically competent display of adolescent angst is beyond me. Partly, one suspects, Hirst's rise to prominence, or, if you prefer, his prodigious achievement of fifteen minutes of fame, articulates a retreat into the known and knowable, into closed worlds - be they glass cages, galleries, or the monad's weary self. Hirst's work is complementary to interventions like VR, in that it actively embraces a seductive closure peddled as vital and thrilling. Like VR, Hirst is aesthetic safe sex.

Writing in the catalogue, *Charles Hall*, who seems unaware of the work of La Monte Young et al, describes Hirst's *In and Out of Love*, which populated a gallery with live butterflies, as a work which 'restores' the gallery 'to one of its least remembered functions - a focus for amazement'. Is this not twaddle, and old twaddle at that? Perhaps comparisons between parvenus like Hirst and old lags like La Monte Young are invidious and unfair. Compare instead, then, the work of Hirst and 'convicted criminal' Rick Gibson, who five years or more ago was making people uncomfortable by walking around art openings in see-through suits crawling with locusts and other insects - and straight away we can see not only how tidy, squeaky clean and accommodating the younger artist is, with his bluebottles in their (his) own little world (no flies on him), but also how his work (despite the layers of rhetoric which shroud it) constitutes a refusal of physicality, of contact - not so much a case of the restoration of the wondrous gallery of yore, as yet another renewal of the politely wretched social relations which keep artists and audience alike in their place.

'Can installation be tamed and purchased?' asked Stuart Morgan in *Artscribe*.

Yes.

DAVE MILTON



Damien Hirst from the ICA, 1992

PROJECTS





# COMPULSIVE COLLECTIONS

Annette Messenger. Arnolfini, Bristol. 18 January-23 February 1992

**W**omen are strapped down, wired up, monitored, covered in mud, in gel, in cream, exposed to steam, vibration, electricity, ultra-violet light, lipo suction. Whilst this may form a critical list of the beauty industry, it is also quite simply a visual description of *Les Tortures Volontaires*, an artwork by Annette Messenger.

Whereas collections of pornography and fashion imagery have in the past been assembled by women artists to present a case against male domination, Messenger's collection of images from the beauty industry does not pass comment, prove a point or take sides. Her role as collector is complicit with that of the makers; she presents us with the visual facts and nothing more.

Comprising between 60 and 80 images re-photographed from beauty treatment adverts and documentation, *Les Tortures Volontaires*, does not portray the women it represents as victims or suffering individuals. There is no attempt to subvert the *false consciousness* of cosmetic treatment; instead we are faced with the fetishistic fascination of all the variable treatments. The extraordinary lengths that these women have gone to demands as much respect as it does ridicule or compassion. Rather than feeling for a particular individual or reading a specific image, we are made to witness the exhaustive range of encyclopedic possibilities - the perversion of collection.

The idea of collecting is in opposition to modernist notions of creativity. It represents a lack of direction, a morbid preoccupation with accumulation and introspection, as opposed to ideas of development and change. The collector is not concerned with the exchange value of objects or in the social meanings of individual parts, but in the meaning of the activity of collecting. Collecting becomes an end in itself, a compulsive obsession. The collector creates an enclosed world, in which objects have different values from those of the outside world. The act of collecting allows values and meanings to be tied down within the collector's own rules and laws, as an escape from social surroundings in which values and meanings are threateningly allusive.

In *The Collector* by John Fowles, the obsessive behaviour of the male character is a product of social inadequacy and communication difficulty. However, these problems are not just particular to that character, they stand for a particular psychological behaviour which is essentially masculine - they represent an example of the motivations of masculine power and the forms that it takes. This is a power which reduces people to objects in order to control them more fully. This is typically a power relationship between men and women.

It is not accidental then that Messenger should collect images from the beauty industry, since these show women who have already been made into objects. It is not actually her own compulsion to objectify and control that is her motivation. Rather she is re-discovering and assembling a collection of images, which has been so fragmented and absorbed within our culture as to be accepted as common place. She is making a collection from an existent collection; the perversion is not her own. She is watching it from a distance, letting it speak for itself.

Messenger's form of collecting is unlike that particular male compulsion to create a minute regime over which to exert control. Her collections of images and



Annette Messenger: Maman - Histoire de sa Robe Verte

objects, be they photographs of bodily parts (*Mes Voeux* (1989)), or collected dresses (*Histoires des Robes* (1991)), seem to comment on the pathos of collecting, of never being able to create an entirely personal world, closed off from exterior influence.

In *Mes Ouvrages* (1989), small photographs of parts of the body are dispersed across a wall, connected by lines of writing. These words serve to explain personal connections between images; a tongue is connected to the back of a head with the word *attente* (wait), both are in turn connected to a nose by the words *criante* (glaring) and *menace* (threat). As connections increase, the possibility of making sense of the interrelations decreases. All the while the words threaten to vanish completely into the texture of the wall on which they are written.

Taking a photograph of your own body removes the element of personal experience: your body becomes an object, it represents *The Body* - all bodies. The adding of words in *Mes Ouvrages*, is an attempt by the artist to reclaim that original personal experience from the depersonalising effect of photography. This attempt to tie down meaning also proves impossible as we realise that language itself is universal and never entirely personal.

In *Collection pour trouver ma meilleure signature* (1972), Messenger presents us with sampled signatures, torn from address books, note pads and scraps of paper, on which she has explored which signature best represents her identity. There is, however, no one signature that she decides on, the process has no end. By taking such a commonplace representation and creating a crisis from it, she makes us question basic assumptions that we may have about the larger issue of identity. Where do signatures come from? Do they express a real unconscious identity, or are they simply appropriated through absorbing and adapting other signatures? Messenger's signature shows so many different styles that we begin to doubt whether there is one single identity behind it all. Some appear copied and translated from other signatures; some appear so *genuine* that they may have in fact been written by other people; others show such a degree of contrivance that it would seem that the artist is trying to shake off her own personal and cultural history, and to re-invent herself. By forcing herself through such an exhaustive process, she asks how desirable it really is to be tied to one identity, one history, one social reality.

For Messenger, the desire to collect is a process of exploration, rather than a self satisfying end in itself. The laws and systems that her collections create do not form a complete and isolated world, but are an attempt to reconcile private experience with social signs and language. Unlike the fetishistic collector who substitutes obscure objects for interpersonal relations, the images and signs that she collects are concerned with interaction and physical experience. She confronts that which is latent behind the desire to collect, namely, sexuality. Her collections are not introverted and closed, but are open to the viewer, because the things that she collects are not in fact objects, but experiences.

EWAN MORRISON



# A MEXICAN DREAM

Channel 4 TV, February 1992

**Y**ou would be forgiven for having forgotten that a decade ago Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen co-curated an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery - a significant, but sadly a one-off episode of its kind - paralleling the work of two artists, a painter and a photographer: **Frida Kahlo** (1907-1954) and **Tina Modotti** (1896-1942). One a first generation Mexican of immigrant parentage from a bourgeois, intellectual milieu; the other a working class Italian immigrant to America at the age of 17, who settled in Mexico from 1923 until she was deported back to Europe in 1930.<sup>(1)</sup> The show was startling because it was, and still is unusual to see an exhibition breaking the bastion of monographic tradition, so common to *historical* reviews of this kind, by staging painting and photography in a deliberate act of juxtaposition - not so much to make distinctions between the different media as to foreground the work of image-making, and to allow attendant issues to emerge from seeing the opposition of the two practitioners working concurrently. Out of the ordinary too, because the practitioners were women. Kahlo and Modotti were highly politicised, both members of the Mexican Communist Party. They emerged from the liberating, post-revolutionary atmosphere of the Mexican renaissance of the 1920's. The Mexican Revolution allowed them to be what they were. Their work exemplifies how it is that politics and art might powerfully inter-relate at different points in time. However, the show was more than an archaeological exhumation. Its curators also intended it to have a real relationship with the present - to raise the question *what does this say about the relationship between art and politics, then and now?*

You may still recall that 1989 was the *sesquicentennial of the birth of photography* (that is the 150th anniversary). This episode was celebrated internationally. One major exhibition, *The Art of Photography*, which toured from the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, to the Australian National Gallery, Canberra, finally arrived at the Royal Academy, London in September 1989. The work of 101 photographers, from 1839 to the present, was included. Only four of the contributors were women and one was unknown. An impressive tome was published to accompany the exhibition. This massive collection of written texts along with *some of the world's most famous and best known images* includes twelve plates by Edward Weston; only one is a portrait, *Tina Modotti*, 1924.<sup>(2)</sup>

What happens in the present always happens in the context of the memory of what happened in the past. Any consideration of the work of Tina Modotti - as a Hollywood actress, a photographic model, a photographer, a political activist and revolutionary - invites questions about marginality: the marginality of the experience of revolutionary political activism, of Modotti *vis-à-vis* Weston and subsequently Kahlo (with Frida's assimilation into the mainstream and her commodification as a colourful, tortured individual)<sup>(3)</sup>. Perhaps what makes Tina Modotti such an unattractive historical figure is her association with a politics that has since been discredited. Her physical beauty and talent along with the ugliness of Stalin's regime are difficult factors to reconcile.

The film *Tina Modotti*, a 52 minute art documentary written and directed by **Ceri Higgins** with Antelope Films, broadcast on Channel 4 in February 1992, was the first major attempt this side of the Atlantic to foreground Modotti since her exposure alongside Kahlo upstairs at the Whitechapel ten years ago. The film was a palimpsest of spoken commentaries by Tina's biographers, comrades and friends, photographs, paintings, archive footage, dramatic reconstructions, extracts from Modotti's letters to Weston

and fictional texts: the marginalisation of Tina Modotti its theme. The remnants of her life - immigration, Weston, Mexico, Berlin, Moscow, Spain - have been put together like a patchwork, distinctly different patterns and hues pieced together to make an aesthetically pleasing whole. Much of what was said in the spoken commentaries was contradictory. As the social historian Bob D'Attilio points out at the very beginning of the film, *'her extraordinary leaps we can't explain. We can speculate.'* The temptation here is to mythologise. What remains of Modotti's life exemplifies this. Indeed, she was visually exalted by both Weston and Rivera (4) and remains an icon of modernist art as well as a revolutionary deity to this day. There is always the danger of substituting the fairytale legend for the work of history. The film avoided this pitfall by pursuing the suggestion that besides being a romantic actress, Tina was also an enhanced revolutionary. Maybe Tina's enigma can only be explained by the feelings of grand passion aroused around revolution? Poignantly, her life also characterises the tragedy of Stalinism for the Left. The development of her own vision was stunted by the authoritarian conservatism of Stalinism. Her bohemian dreams, born in post-revolutionary Mexico, were poisoned by the bloody civil war in Spain. The betrayal she must have felt at the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact broke her spirit.

This film significantly broadened the scope of the contexts out of which Tina Modotti might be remembered by illuminating the obscured, less glamorous episodes of her life. The ability to speak freely about communism in this post-Soviet era is extremely important. For some audiences the film must have had a therapeutic effect in that it made visible the tangled roots of socialism, whilst not omitting to highlight the spread of fascism against which the struggle arose. A welcome contribution, then, to this effort and to the understanding of Tina Modotti's enduring fascination by many others. Her uncharacteristic journey from West to East, from Hollywood to Spain, was uncompromisingly detailed here. No wonder she proved hard to label. Her's was a Mexican Dream.

## EMMA AYLING

**1)** *Modotti's life was marked by rootlessness. This was the longest period of time that Tina spent settled anywhere during the course of her adult life, since emigration to America from Udine, Italy in 1913.*

**2)** *There were no photographs by Tina in the exhibition, neither was she cited in any of the accompanying written texts.*

**3)** *Since 1982, four major monographic publications about Frida Kahlo have appeared in this country. It seems that Tina Modotti has not been so easy to commodify.*

**4)** *Edward Weston was Tina's lover, teacher (of photography) and collaborator. They travelled together in Mexico in 1922. Edward left in 1926. He is remembered as a 'great' of American modernist art. Nudes were the largest category in his total output of 60,000 photographs. He never made a self portrait.*

*Diego Rivera, husband of Frida Kahlo, was one of the foremost Mexican muralists. Tina was invited into his circle of friends on her arrival in Mexico. He used her as a model for his paintings and included her in his murals. She, in return, documented the muralist's work. She also introduced Diego to Frida.*





# Sean Taylor - The Twelve Apostles

Collective Gallery, Edinburgh:  
11 January-1 February 1992

**O**n first entering the darkened space of **Sean Taylor's** installation, you could well be forgiven for thinking you had stepped into an Eastern Orthodox church; the heavy perfume of burning incense clings to your nostrils, and gold framed icons encrusted in jewels hang on every wall.

This initial impression is soon overturned - the room's sole illumination is provided by hundreds of coloured fairy lights, adorning the frames of the icons, which on closer inspection turn out to be portraits of infamous contemporary world leaders. The very names bring a chill to the spine... P.W. Botha, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, Ayatollah Khomeini, Margaret Thatcher, Nicolae Ceausescu... in all, twelve grisly visages - the apostles of the exhibition title.

The religion to which these images belong is unclear: a mixture of styles - combining elements of 14th century Byzantine and Arabesque Christian icons, with the trappings of contemporary Hindu worship. The face of each leader is a photocopy of a magazine photograph, with the addition of rouge, eyeshadow and plastic costume jewellery. The overall effect is to create an appearance similar to that of the mythical princes and gods who fight it out in the TV episodes of the Indian epic *Mahabharat*.

Taylor has based all the images on specific icons. The replicas have then been made or added to, or altered in some way appropriate to the character of the person portrayed: for example, the portrait of Margaret Thatcher is based on a 14th century icon *The Black Madonna*. She looks skyward as if in search of divine inspiration. Strings of pearls and the legend *ave MT* have been added to the decoration.

Reagan (*Ronnie*) on the opposite wall, makes a more pathetic figure; eyes downcast, fist clenched to his head, as though trying to remember what to do next. He wears a suit made up of plastic jewels, arranged in a stars and stripes pattern; sheriff badges surround him in a halo.

On the wall between these two, a fascinating triptych: Ayatollah Khomeini, flanked by Saddam Hussein on the left, and Colonel Ghadaffi on the right. From all three frames hang braided rope tassels: red for Saddam, green for Ghadaffi and for Khomeini, black. His portrait is by far the most sinister of the three - Khomeini garbed completely in jet black, a colour which in Islamic culture signifies purity and piety (an ironic choice, as he was never ratified as an ayatollah); it is also the colour which he forced women to cover themselves with after the 1979 revolution.

The use of traditional artistic methods towards satirical ends has precedents in the installations and paintings of Hans Haacke - most notably in his portrait of Margaret Thatcher as Queen Victoria (with the Saatchi brothers painted on memorial dinner plates in the background) and the photomontages of Peter Kennard, whose interpretation of Constable's *The Haywain* featured a Cruise missile. A line can also be traced back to the silkscreen images of Andy Warhol and his portraits of Chairman Mao.

One one level, the bringing together of such kitsch pseudo-reverence with images of conservative, ruthless politicians is effective in ridiculing and subverting the pomposity and seriousness with which these figures present themselves. But the selection of this particular group of gilded faces raises other issues than merely caricature.

A more serious intent is at work: by recontextualising the images of world leaders (and by extension their aims and ideas), Taylor is questioning the representation of politics and religion, and also our own attitudes to these figures. A certain love/hate relationship attaches to people in positions of extreme power, a tendency which finds its ultimate expression in the hierarchies and mystique of organised religion.

Reagan, Thatcher, Botha, Shamir, Ghadaffi, Khomeini, Saddam, Pol Pot, Marcos, Ceausescu: Taylor has selected leaders who, while publicly opposed to, or outright enemies of, each other were all, in one way or another, connected: whether by economic or ideological ties, or by the process of international *real politik*. By grouping them together physically and stylistically, he makes the link evident.

Similarly in mixing the iconographies and imagery of Eastern and Western religious traditions, he suggests that there is more common ground than the respective theologians might admit.

The rulers he presents to us are, despite the trappings of modernity and the concessions to democracy of present day governments, not so far removed from the Byzantine emperors, Catholic monarchs or Hindu princes of old, whose appearance they emulate.

The message seems to be that whatever their religious, economic or political differences, *strong* leaders will always choose to be portrayed as god-kings, to be adored by the cowed masses, and condemn their rivals and enemies as demons.

Ideology equals Theology.  
Politics is the fight between Good and Evil.  
War becomes Holy War.

Of note are the three images which are least rooted in the western, representational figurative tradition: Ghadaffi, Pol Pot and Ceausescu are all set in a largely abstract field of decorative elements: a small photograph of Ghadaffi in a circular frame, at the centre of a copper plate, is engraved with green serpentine patterning in the Islamic tradition. Pol Pot, in a similar way, is surrounded by a frame entirely filled by small golden skulls, each interspersed with coloured lights. But the most peculiar is *Nicu*, sitting at the centre of an Aztec calendar, studded with small fake diamonds. By stylistically differentiating these icons from the rest, I believe Taylor is trying to represent cultures and regimes which the West has least explored, least understood. In the case of Ceausescu, the reference to Aztec civilisation, and the complexity of the interweaved patterns surrounding him, is surely a representation of the maze-riddled, pyramid-like power structure of which he was the centre.

The alternative title to the exhibition, *The Last Laugh*, explains the accompanying soundtrack of audience laughter, which gives the unsettling impression of listening to a sit-com. Taylor seems to be saying that the icons gathered here have been put in place with the help of the cathode ray tube in the corner. However, the last laugh does not belong to us, it is most certainly theirs.

CHRIS BYRNE



Sean Taylor: The Twelve Apostles 1992



# Review

## COMICS

**W**hile the decades-old duopoly of Marvel and DC still have the closed world of specialist comic shops firmly within their superheroic grip, recent years have at least seen a proliferation of new publishers. While this has brought to light a few excellent creators, 'independent' doesn't necessarily equate with radical ideas, formal experimentation or honest accounts of marginal experience. Independents may be the *Salon des Refusées* of comics, but they still display more aspirants than alternatives: ten chinese whispers of a cliché for every attempt at a personal statement.

However, there is yet another stratum of creation/production, and that is the so-called 'small press comics'. These are generally published by the creators or editors, often in tiny photocopied editions. There are a surprising number of small press titles currently being published in Britain, and while they obviously vary greatly in both intent and execution, as a whole they have far more honesty, imagination and vitality than the more widely distributed imported *indies*. Few of these ever make it into the network of specialist comic shops, achieving such circulation as they have through mail order or local outlets.

The roots of the current small press activity can be traced back to the early 1980s, in the wake of the indie record boom, when a few creators began photocopying editions of their work; **Phil Elliott** and **Eddie Campbell** started the seminal *Fast Fiction* anthology, and Paul Gravett began a distribution service of the same name. Since the *Fast Fiction* service ceased to operate in 1990, there have been various attempts to create some kind of distribution and support network, but nothing has come to fruition yet. However, Luke Walsh and Mike Kidson in Liverpool have started publishing *ZUM!*, a *Small Press Comix* (sic) directory, news and reviews magazine. The first three quarterly issues have received about a hundred issues of almost as many titles, proving that the lack of a network has not stifled production. While the quality of contributions is still uneven, it's a sensible place to start for anyone wanting to find out more about small press comics in the UK.

The items discussed below are simply ones that I found interesting and are not a cross section or representative sampling.

*'We were frothblowers of the first order, life was a fugacious haze, and "nothing doing" was our motto':*

Gimbley, an aging civil servant, complete with Bobby Charlton haircut, waxes lyrical about his implausibly full youth. Significant moments in writer/artist Phil Elliott's life have been spun by Gimbley into elaborate melodramas, or poetic metaphors unhindered by narrative and juxtaposed with abstract, but often tongue in cheek, images.

Elliott self-published the first *Tale from Gimbley* a decade ago in a photocopied mini-comic which he sold for cost price, mainly to friends. Gimbley also appeared in *Fast Fiction* magazine and went on to reach a wider audience through *Escape* and, briefly, the *NME*. The process seems to have come full circle, with the most recent addition being self-published in intimate A5 size, with a colour xeroxed image hand pasted onto the cover.

This *Tale* is an unusually low key and naturalistic one, of young adults sharing a house, and the resulting rivalries and unrealised romances; a situation many will recognise, but which is rarely documented. The story assumes an organic form, true to the process of gathering and selecting details from memory. This is gently brought to our attention by the *picture frame* device of the narrator. We don't experience the events so much as Gimbley's telling of them. Making that narrator the protagonist, decades older, allows for reappraisal of the younger man's actions, whilst still encouraging us to doubt his objectivity.

Elliott makes conscious use of the black and white *line* drawing tradition in comics, achieving a delicate fusion of 'cartoon' exaggeration, and naturalistic surface. He's able to create subtleties of tone and texture, whilst remaining true to the 'materials' of brush and pen lines. Never intrusive, the setting of bedsit, pub and street provide carefully composed incidental music for a drama of facial expression and body posture.

Though diverse, Elliott's work is characterised by an unsentimental warmth and love of life. He eschews the counter dependent rebellion of cynicism and negativity. For ten years he has been continually experimenting and developing, challenging himself and his readers. He's been published not only in Britain, but in the USA, France and Australia, as well as reaching 50,000 people every week in his local paper, the *Maidstone Burgh Gazette*. Perhaps then, we shouldn't be surprised at the note of bitterness which occasionally surfaces in the current work. Elliott obviously takes pleasure in producing these small press editions of his work and equally, the reader may enjoy feeling part of a small group of confidants. Nevertheless, it's dismaying to think of this rich and subtle work reaching only a tiny audience, compared to numerous banal 'diary' comics published across the Atlantic.

*Neverseidge* is also a naturalistically handled story centring on the inhabitants of a single house. But there's no youthful exuberance or hope of 'graduating' to a career and family home for these unfortunate members of the underclass. This thirty page first episode involves Wayne, a teenage runaway arriving in London amidst murder headlines, and being brought to the house by the 'tattooist' Carson. Despite the hint of melodrama, Chris Webster avoids *deus ex machina*. Instead he lets us see the characters, and the effects on them of their situation, through the minimal events of their daily lives.

In different ways they all try to escape their miserable lives in the consensual world. Marty sleeps to talk to Emery, his dream friend. Berry tries to discover other worlds through archaeology. Wayne thinks about Icarus-like dead angels 'making the clouds black, like wasps trapped in striplights'. Fellicia talks to her toys. *The bloke downstairs* climbs out his window to maraud the streets like a balaclavaed poor man's Batman, and we suspect still worse of Carson.

Despite the lack of overt, physical action, there's

COMICS



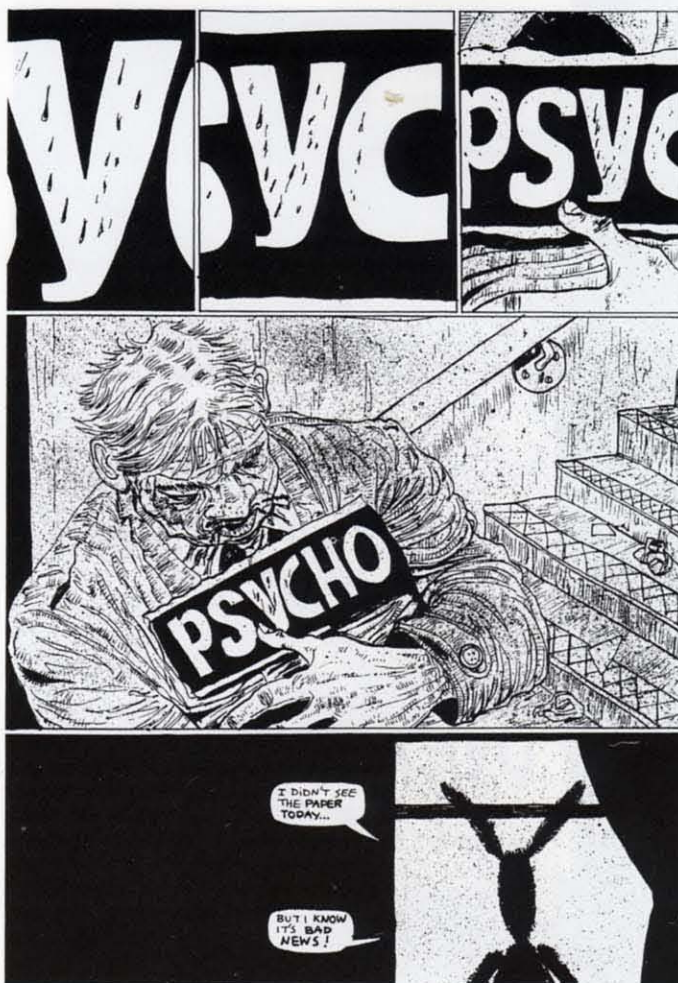


never any Doonesbury style talking head repetition: convincingly realised characters act out their dramas in response to an Edward Hopper vision of seedy London. Brixton-based Webster has created a true aesthetic of the bedsit. This is the most powerful in the series of large drawings of the individual rooms, with their clutter of paraphernalia and detritus. Accumulated around a half-naked sleeping Marty are: keys, pills, matches, coathangers, books (open and closed), cans (crushed and uncrushed), a cricket bat, a 1970s oil-filled lamp, a snow scene *à la* Citizen Kane, and a TV showing an image of a finger poking a scalp.

In 10 years of producing and publishing his own comics, **Ed Pinsent** has created an oeuvre that is unusually diverse, yet has certain elements running clearly through it. He invariably strips away the names, clothes, streets, houses and other 'facts' of existence, to explore the underlying dramas through symbol and metaphor deceptively dressed as fantasy, even whimsy. Through their individual mythologies Vladimir the Medico, Drake Ullingsworth the detective, Windy Wilberforce the linguist/semiotologist, and others, explore their creator's most private dilemmas, desires and fears.

He has tirelessly experimented with the structure of the stories, juggling the order of events, re-telling events from different viewpoints, or with new information added each time, and telling stories within stories within stories. The stories collected in *Primitif Comix* however, are always linear and causal, as the eponymous protagonist is impelled from one incident to the next. A tree struck by lightning and fashioned into a mask gives him strange and seemingly prophetic visions. While this initially attracts power and respect, hubris leads him inevitably to dereliction and despair. In *Hunting for Moravia*, Primitif grows tired of sport and desires a suitable lover. A quest involving imprisonment, sacrifices, pacts, effigies and magic arrows ends when Primitif rescues the legendary Moravia. After one short embrace, however, she burns in the lava: merely a creation of the god Papier. Like all Pinsent stories, these are simple in their presentation, but complex in their meanings. Never resorting to wish fulfilment, dogmatic statements or artificially simple solutions.

Pinsent's drawing also adopts numerous guises, as appropriate to individual stories and mythologies. Once again though, this is overlaid on a distinctive Pinsent syntax: cartoonily expressive figuration in almost diagrammatic compositions. He is one of the very few comic artists to have jumped off the continuum between traditional cartoon styles and photographic transcription. This has allowed him to develop a more extended visual vocabulary, making expressive use of abstract marks and shapes in a way akin to Kandinsky, Klee or Miro. In recent years, artists working in comics have become more aware of the tension between drawings as images and as pure marks on paper. Few people, though, play as wittily upon this as Ed Pinsent, with his daring combinations of huge loose brushstrokes and intricate pen lines. While *Primitif* is ostensibly African, the drawings are obviously influenced by Mayan and Aztec Art, while the influence of African carvings becomes visible in the later stories.



This collection contains some of Pinsent's earliest stories which seem crude in comparison to the recent work, where every line is vibrant and the primitif world dances through the panels. *Insect Talisman* and *The Volcano Mask* are consummate works by a unique and important artist.

The love of print, and the object value implicit in many small press publications, is a prime concern for Rich Holden, who seems to have finally found his perfect form in a series of A8 (2' x 3') booklets called *Mini Mesh*. Many people have made use of varying colours of paper and ink in comics, but it's never reacted so explosively with the material as it does here. This array of improvised brush and pen, scrawl and doodle, with collaged images from comics and elsewhere may only be comics because they are images printed in sequence and because Holden says they are, but who cares?!

## GRAHAM JOHNSTONE

Mini Mesh is 50p (plus a stamped SAE) per issue, from Rick Holden, Green Bone Graphix, 14 Woodlands Drive, Hawarden, Clwyd, CH5 3LA. Primitif Comix is £2.95 from Ed Pinsent, 43 Finsen Road, London SE5 9AW. Another two quid should get you a couple of his other publications. ZUM! is £1.75 per issue or £5.00 for a 3 issue subscription from ZUM!: 10 Mannering Road, Liverpool, L17 8TR. A Tale from Gimbley is £1.00 plus SAE from: Phil Elliot, 2 Alexanra Street, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 2TD. NEVERSEDGE £7 is £1.50 including p&p from: Chris Webster, 396 Brixton Road, London SW9 7AW.

A range of other titles are available from the small press table at the regular Glasgow Comic Market at the City Halls, Candleriggs, Glasgow. Next dates: 6th June 1992, 15th '92, and 7th November '92 (all Saturdays, at 12 noon).





# Review

## LIVE ART

Edited by Robert Ayers and David Butler  
published by AN publications  
PO Box 23  
Sunderland SR4 6DG  
091 567 3589  
£9.95

Even though I do not know what 'live art' or 'performance art' is, I would know when it is and Although I cannot describe the whole, I could recognise some of its parts.

It could be said that the previous two statements are amongst the most commonly used when beginning an attempt to define live art. It was once described to me as trying to nail a live octopus to the beach; possible, but you'd need a lot of nails. This book mostly, but not completely, avoids definitions and sensibly - and more successfully - concentrates on identifying some of the parts.

The cover of the book is an enigmatic image of a person with an open umbrella illuminated by spotlights, walking by water, enclosed by high, polythene walls and surrounded by levitating umbrellas. Inside we are told this image represents a work that *investigated and in turn disrupted the physicality, function and convention of the place*, in this case a motorway footbridge in Stockton. Across the top of the cover are the words *Live Art*. The editors' names appear half way down the right side and in the bottom right hand corner is the Artists Newsletter publications logo. From the outside, this book looks as if it expects you to know what it is; a primer for those already fully, or partially, engaged in the practice or politics of making or presenting live art. The editors think they know who we are and the nature of our environment.

The text is divided into nineteen chapters. The first has the heady but ominous title *Changing Peoples Lives*, the nineteenth is more ominously *Legal Constraints*. Between each of the chapters are short items written mainly by artists, called Profiles. These are snapshots of an individual's or group's practice. The design and layout is unexciting, the printing quality of the few black and white photographs is poor. Loosely, the first half of the book is personal and anecdotal. Lessons, good and bad, learnt by

artists the hard way through experience is recounted with a wry humour, or in some cases undisguised anger. The second half written by subject experts, is factual dealing with logistics, finance and the law. From the inside this book expects you to recognise the dilemma and paradox of its worthy intentions: how to articulate the motivation behind a historically (and theoretically) subversive activity, and introduce the potentially restrictive framework for a code of practice.

In essence, the first half of the book celebrates the limitless potential of the form, whilst the second half literally lays down the law. What appears to be an ideological conflict only arises through the juxtaposition of *why* and *how* in a handbook format of this nature. The book takes the position of observer; artists describe events, make commonsensical lists. There are dreary pages of public funding sources (already out of date) compiled by ex-Arts Council officers. The same events and festivals are named repeatedly throughout as evidence of opportunity and activity, but not good practice. Ironically, the artists' material is the thinnest, and the most important part of this book (for all artists) is the section devoted to logistics, finance and law.

Artists who make live art are at pains to say that their art is in the *real* world. It is market-free and its potential is rooted in the image and the moment. It is ideas and experiences in motion. Fine. But the opportunities for artists are determined by a small group of individuals and all art activities have their emotional and/or political objectives restricted and filtered by invisible (and not so invisible) cultural, social and legislative structures. It is, in part, the knowledge and understanding of these hierarchies that determine individual and corporate relationships, that give artists power. The power to decide and define for themselves their role, recognise and demand their rights and to make the decisions that places their work with the most precision and effectiveness. Any source that provides, however slightly, further momentum for these developments is to be applauded, but this book addresses these issues too benignly.

ALEX FULTON



PRINTED  
MATTER





# TEN.8

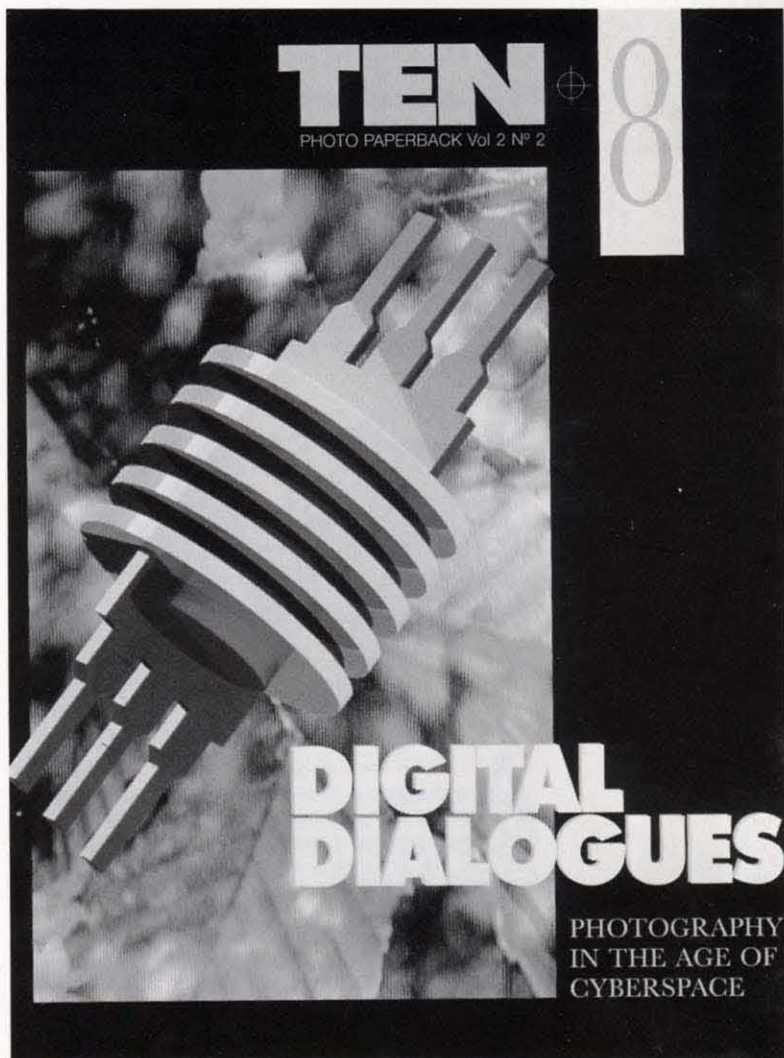
'Digital Dialogues: Photography in the Age of Cyberspace' Edited by Derek Bishton, Andy Cameron and Tim Druckrey  
Ten.8 Photopaperback (Vol 2; No 2)

**T**EN.8 is a paperback book which, through its thematic editions, covers various issues relating to photography. In this issue, TEN.8 deals with the use of digital image technologies and the way in which they are increasingly employed over a range of artistic and commercial practices. In covering this phenomenon, TEN.8 draws on the writing of both theorists and practitioners, provides a colourful range of examples as well as a catalogue of references, both cultural and technological. Fortunately, many of the writers stray from dealing strictly with the repercussions of these technologies on the art of photography and enter into debates concerning the veracity of contemporary visual images in all their forms. Many of the articles also analyse the foundations and applications of these technologies and develop arguments as to where these practices have led us.

In his introduction, **Andy Cameron** does give the reader the sense that the use of digital visual technologies is a *fait accompli*; that it represents a crisis for photography and a loss of the medium's 'analogue innocence'. The essential fact that 'digital photography' does not rely on light as its source for existence but is encoded data (i.e., scanned information such as words, pictures, textures, video imagery, translated into binary code of 1s and 0s for the computer to manipulate), means that the product of these processes cannot possess an 'indexical relation with what it portrays, a relation which is beyond code, or before code - an analogue relation'. In establishing this position, the application of the term 'photography' to any image produced in this way can now be seen as redundant, as the prefix 'photo-' is premised on the notion of light. In conclusion, Cameron asks: *'Is the image finished as a document? Can we no longer prove things with pictures?'*

The most interesting articles in TEN.8 deal very much with this issue but approach it from the opposite direction, making it clear that anything can be proved with pictures. In her wide-ranging article *'Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations'*, Martha Rosler states that *'The identification of photography with objectivity is a modern idea'*, and details many examples of the manipulation of photography's assumed veracity, ranging from Robert Capra's famous Spanish Civil War photograph, to American picture editors trimming Saddam Hussein's moustache so it appeared more like Hitler's. But in a significantly telling phrase Rosler points out that *'certain modes of address are near exhaustion as a way of communicating facticity'*; and in the light of this she concludes her article by stating, *'If material conditions need to be re-described, more painstakingly and in novel forms, in order to be re-invested with believability, then we can surely develop the forms - and the means of dissemination - to do so.'*

Two presentiments which thread within many of the theoretical articles in TEN.8 are first, the role image technology plays in our understanding of the Gulf War and second, the evolving technology of virtual reality systems. Tim Druckrey's article *'Deadly Representations or Apocalypse Now'* links these two elements through a complex debate about the encroachment of technology into our consciousness and the increasing reliance on simulation and fantasy as our only means of interpreting and understanding reality. In his view we face a society that bases its judgements more on *'the effect rather than the display'*, and he quotes Paul Virilio from an interview in *Flash Art* who states *'We live in a world where*



*everything is co-present, where before and afterwards no longer make any sense, and where our gaze, the very fact of observation, is what creates effects'.*

TEN.8's strength is that the theoretical articles deal with very core issues that affect our understanding of images and the way we decipher the information. All presentational forms use pre-determined codes and visual structures to convey their messages. In doing this they also provide a powerful carrier signal for other subtler forms of information. It is these notions of the extraneous nature of digital image technology, as well as the fears of being seen to be collaborating with or endorsing 'military technology' (*Are PCs PC?*, John F Simon Jr), that many artists find disturbing. The nature of these technologies and the presumptions in the software that drive them all appear to maintain a certain corporate finesse. However, among the artists' contributions, two statements give the lie to this assumption. First, under the banner *Street Digital*, the Los Angeles based artist and 'digital activist' Daniel Martinez points out that, *'what I like about working with new technology is that it doesn't care who uses it, it cannot discriminate. A computer is going to work the same for you as the next person'*. And in a written accompaniment to one of her works, the New York artist Gretchen Bender makes some relevant points: *'as artists, we cannot allow ourselves to become visually illiterate and technology is a crucial part of the visual expansion of culture ... I have to continually remind myself that there is no pure space of production'*. In this respect TEN.8 provides a vivid platform from which to view the evolution of a 'hyper-space' fit to accommodate the digital dialogues of the future.

ALAN ROBERTSON





## ReR RECORDS

ReR Records Quarterly Magazine: Vol 3  
No. 3. ReR Megacorp, 46 The Gallup,  
Sutton, Surrey, SM2 5RY

## EAR Magazine

Vol. 16 no. 1 131 Varick St. Room  
905 New York NY 10013-1323

## Electric Shock Treatment (EST)

£1.50 c/o Northbrook House, Free Street  
BishopsWaltham  
Southampton SO3 1EE

**A**t times reading like a technical handbook or a treatise on aesthetics, at other times an excursion into the perplexing and the absurd, ReR magazine has carved out a fine reputation for itself in its six years of existence. Originally the magazine seemed to serve as an adjunct to the mail-order LP, the printed item now seems to take on a life of its own. Earlier issues resemble an alchemist's manuscripts (particularly when **Peter Blegvad** and **Frank Key** are let loose) compared to the more cohesive production format provided by **Counter Productions**, but the charm still lingers. A new batch of writers also feature more prominently with **Tim Hodgkinson** and **Roger Sutherland** providing complementary approaches to a personal/historical analytical style. Hodgkinson's article on 'Alternative Spaces' (ReR Vol 3, no. 3), with reference to the *Reithalle* in Switzerland, reveals a familiar pattern:

'You announce your autonomous centre, and there's an immediate vacuum-suction effect as every dealer, junkie, screwball and drunk in town heads for the place to do business. This plays into the hands of the town council who can now pin the blame for every social problem in the city on the autonomous centre: it's a real self-fulfilling prophecy of the type beloved of rigid moralists.'

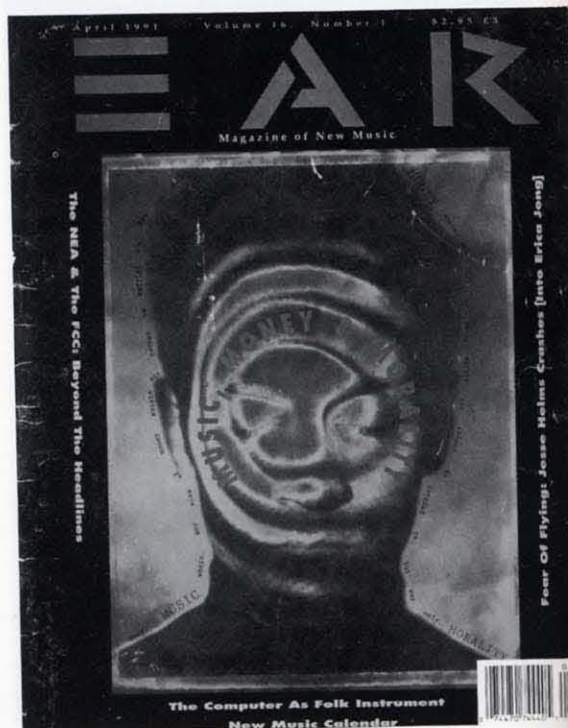
ReR covers a side of 'new music' which continues to grow out of progressive rock roots; one main concern (begun in issue one by the composer **Steve Moore**) is the notion of 'the recording studio as a musical instrument'. This is fairly typical of the manner in which ReR will approach a subject with a view to challenging our perception and preconceptions of the 'way things are done' in music. It's a mature and enthusiastic voice that's on offer and one which usually stays on the right side of academicism.

Although it represents quite a tight group of mostly London-based contributors, **Chris Cutler** the editor, has a view of 'alternative culture' as the struggle 'to mean': to share expertise and de-mystify the process. This is in one sense that aspect of the avant-garde relating to reconnaissance: gathering intelligence to inform strategies, chart territories and courses of action: to become oppositional to the deceptions and robberies of the mainstream by sheer force of creativity: a primal approach which does not shy away from principles and intellectual honesty but aims to refine them. Recommended as an antidote for those suffering from media sickness.

Ear is a valuable insight into and directory of the 'new music' scene in New York: comprehensively covering a range of styles, from the 'dry academicism of uptown' to the 'free and funky eclecticism of downtown'. Its voice seems well placed amongst its constituency, with group discussions and interviews which address thematic issues forming the mainstay of its activities. Music, money and morality are the subjects of this particular number and inevitably what emerges (apart from explaining why the rump of U.S. musical exports are so mindlessly atrocious) drifts towards the subject of censorship. Mad dog Senator **Jessie Helms** gets the nomination as the Grand Inquisitor of a supression which knows no bounds. **Nan Rubin**, a consultant specialising in Public Radio broadcasting, production and policy, shows clearly the mechanism which puts pioneers such as college radio and non-commercial stations under threat of punitive legislation: forcing them to adhere to the dictates of the Federal Communication Commission and its 24 hour-a-day broadcast ban on 'indecentcy'. This extends right into 'controversial political issues ... readings [by authors] ... discussions on rape and AIDS', and is ratified by the Supreme Court's 'seven dirty words' decision (fuck, shit, piss, cunt, mother-fucker and tits, in case you're curious). This, however, is under challenge from a coalition of intercollegiate broadcasting organisations and authors such as **Allen Ginsberg**.

The section on technological aspects of music contains interesting observations on computer music by the pioneer of algorithmic composition and inventor of the 'music mouse' programme, **Laurie Spiegel**. Her work calls into question the existence of 'intellectual property' based on the assumption that the composer is the single individual responsible for the 'explicitly notated content of the work'; she aims for a common ownership of music through computer data and music becoming anonymous common property in culture, in a manner analogous to 'folk music'.

Ear seeks to ask self-effacing questions as to what financial support is 'owed artists' and from whom: what does artistic success actually mean and how should it be pursued? Their responses - interesting to view from a different culture - aid the renewal of their own commitment to an art of validity and vitality and the fostering of some form of political unity: that elusive project which always seems to avoid the arts community, at the expense of music, money and morality.





Music from the end of time is the sub-title of EST by Brian Duguld. A new publication born out of the perceived need to establish an 'alternative networking magazine' in the U.K. comparable to the American *Factsheet Five*. Intentionally eclectic, it devotes much of its attention to promoting the independent cassette distribution networks who share its interest in establishing a direct relationship with their audience based on contact, collaboration and exchange. EST plans to act as a tool enabling its readers to (what could be characterised as) join the conspiracy of the Blankety Blank generation and play their part in erasing Casey Kasem and the American Chart Show from the face of the Earth.

First to admit that 'there is a lot of crap in the underground experimental ghetto', it's not written to preach to the converted and at a modest £1.50 it provides a great directory for those already interested/involved and anyone else out there who feels fed up with the crap coming from the mainstream ghetto. Its review section presents an expensive selection of material accompanied by snappy and subjective comments, ranging from the dismissive to the drooling where appropriate. It also provides inside information and advice on just how to track down your selection from the latest recordings from the mad, bad and dangerous to know. Particularly prominent distribution organisations are featured and catalogued in more depth to convey a fuller sense of the territory you might be delving into. There are of course interviews with (obscure) bands: these can seem almost formulaic in their tediousness wherever they're printed, but EST's interview with the 'seemingly pointless' Factor X is an exception *sui generis* - it's only a pity Andre Breton didn't live to see it.

EST probably hasn't quite got its fangs into subjects on a more literary or cultural theme yet - with a rather fawning interview with professional acid casualty Robert Anton Wilson and a much too liberal essay on the 'use and abuse of Fascist imagery in Industrial music', which reproduced some classic Thames & Hudson gaffs on Schwartzkogl and the Actionists - but taken as a whole it's a thoroughly commendable project showing ample evidence of dedication and research. It deserves results and remember, it's another nail in Casey's coffin.

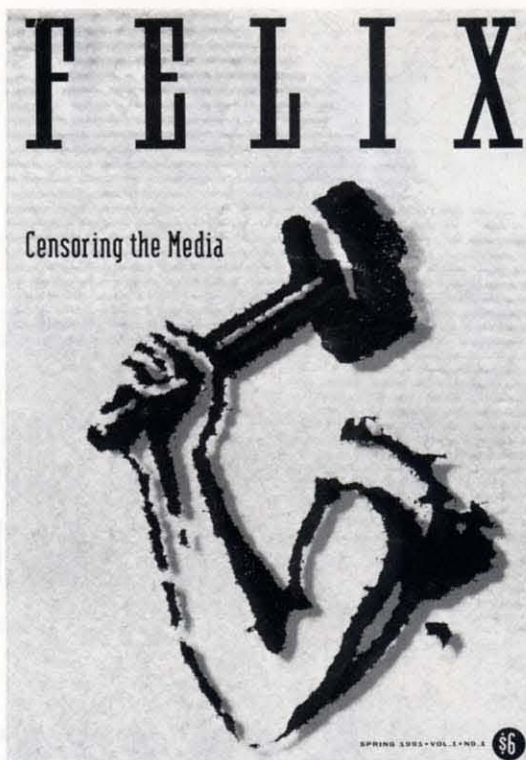
WILLIAM CLARK

## FELIX

Vol.1, No.1. *Censoring the Media*,  
and Vol.1, No.2. *Shot/Reverse Shot:*  
*A Cross-Circuit Videologue*.

Writing in the 1991 catalogue for the LVA, American writer **Kathy High** suggests that 'camcorder activism' has challenged the enveloping bias of the mass media - many citizens are now arming themselves with cheap and accessible equipment to record their daily lives and to report on issues surrounding it. She draws the analogy between this and the appearance of literature upon the expansion of the printing press, creating access for the general public to make their own meaning. The emergence of oppositional enclaves in the USA around the disenfranchisement of sexuality and identity, galvanised by the response to the Aids crisis, have lead to the creation of a politically active aesthetic in video practice (see, for example, **Stuart Marshall's** recent and powerful documentary on **ACT-UP** and **Outrage**).

The politics of plurality and multiculturalism go some way to editorially shaping the magazine **Felix**, of which, Kathy High is the editor. There is an urgency about many of the issues in **Felix** which seeks to click



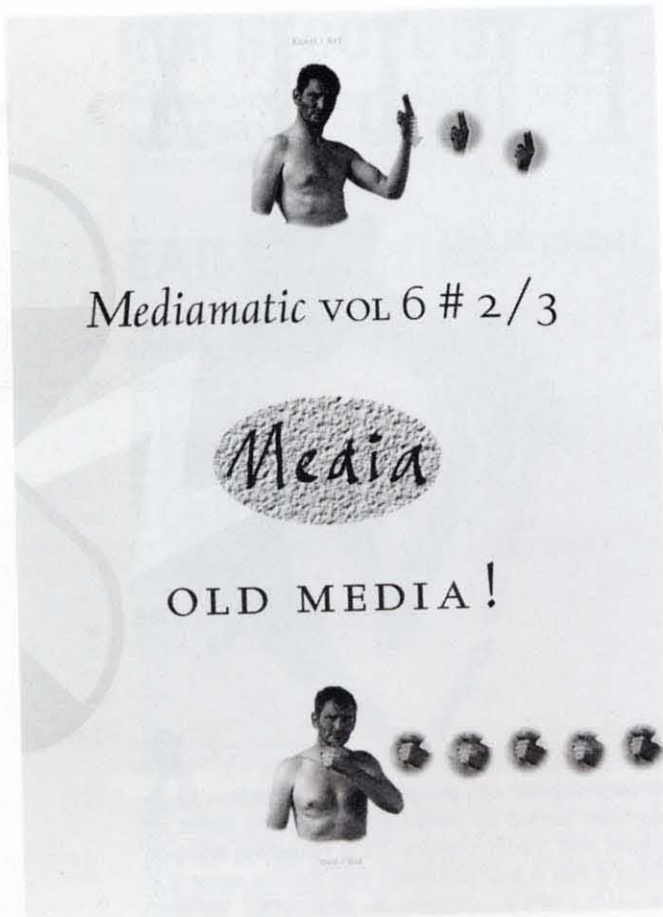
the experimental with the political, an approach which has been termed as 'media activism' in the States by cultural and media workers. It's a refreshing situation and one that is less repressed than the one existing in the U.K. which creates a dichotomy between 'community' and 'artistic' based work.

Issue one takes on the theme of 'Censoring the Media' and contains a cross-section of pieces from video alternatives to television to artists-documentation pieces against repression and censorship. In 'Censoring the Silence', Julie Zando asks what freedom of expression is, citing the example where a public access TV programme in Kansas was prevented from transmitting due to a Ku Klux Klan programme. The contradictions within discussions on this issue are embraced as she asks 'if one group is prevented from exercising its right of free speech, everyone loses', and on how 'freedom of speech' is used by conservative powers to impose the ruling logic:

**'freedom of speech'** is evoked as a convenient slogan to fight censorship, but as a slogan it is rhetorical speech. It acts to mask the very real issue of **freedom of being** - especially sexual freedom and the varied ways in which this is expressed by consensual adults. Empty rhetoric allows some people to support **free speech** while simultaneously trying to repress the content of that speech'.

Issue two has a theme of 'Videologue': writers and artists were contacted with a set of questions concerning the problematics of communication and of cultural difference and asked to respond. For the discerning 'reader', themes recur and develop from issue one; always in-depth and informative. One contribution comes from the **8mm News Collective** which is reproduced in the style of a daily paper and which states their aims as being to create alternative news outlets with portable equipment on those issues, of which there are many, which the established media overlook. It also includes a statement of intent from a video collective called **Testing the Limits** who produce educational documentaries on AIDS activism. The standpoint is of countering prejudice of 'a public' and also the institutionalised prejudice within TV:





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Media

OLD MEDIA!

'...evaluating and counteracting mainstream media became a major concern of the Collective. We considered the countless **victim tapes** which showed faceless, withered bodies lying helplessly in hospital beds and promoted the belief that **lifestyle** causes AIDS; scientific documentaries which pictured PAC-MAN models in costly computer graphics and presented conjecture as fact; safer sex films which advocated sexual abstinence or condoms but not sex; and elaborate satellite links composed of AIDS **experts** and government apologists dispensing fragmented truisms and moral rhetoric. We tracked the media and judged its programs to be fraught with misinformation, improper language and profound cultural insensitivity. Clearly, bad television was shaping the minds of Americans nationwide. We could not let this go unchallenged.

Such calls to action, of invoking a public consciousness to political action, are characteristic of Felix its conscious editorial line. The magazine is inspired by the projection of Felix the Cat in a late 1920's mechanical TV transmission by NBC - drawing parallels with Scotland and the experiments undertaken by **John Logie Baird** and his transmission of 'Stookie Bill'. Rather than being anti-TV, Felix is an attempt to get back to basics by eulogising the beginnings of television when it 'still lay in the hands of inventors and amateurs'.

It comes in a larger than B-5 format, is perfect bound, printed on high quality paper, and contains many reproductions. Its design is busy, but never repetitive, with consideration given to the layout in terms of its contents. As a magazine which challenges the Eurocentrism, homophobia, racism and sexism of the media, it is a useful magazine for media folk, progressive thinkers and camcorder fetishists who will learn that there's more to video documentation than the banana skin sketches of *You've Been Framed*.

Writing in the Dutch 'Art and Media' magazine, **Mediamatic** (Vol 5 # 4), **Alfred Birnbaum** writes about the use of new available technologies, in this instance *The Dainty Woman's Fax* currently available in Japan - a gadget to fit in the user's handbag (filofax size?). He cites the growing recorded cases of prank or nuisance fax calls - the transmission of pornographic images anonymously through the telecommunications networks which he calls *Fex* (Fax-Sex) and defines as 'a form of exposure fetishism'. It is a truism that whatever you can think of, as Birnbaum testifies, it is not only being thought of by someone else, but is in the process of being done. The aforementioned portable fax now has, as Birnbaum concludes, the capacity to link up with certain PC's: 'On top of the AIDS scare (*Artificial Intelligence Designed Stupidity*), will we now be see in a rise in **FEXUALLY** transmitted viruses?.'

Such blending of the factual and the absurd are characteristic of Mediamatic - its idiosyncrasy is one of its strong features. The same issue proclaims its theme of *Radical Boredom* and refers to the phenomena of **Otaku**, a name given to a new generation of Japanese teenagers obsessed with the gadgets of the consumer culture, such as computer games. In his article *Otaku: Japanese Kids colonize the realm of Information and Media*, **Volker Grassmuck** writes:

*They are an underground, but they are not opposed to the system. They change manipulate and subvert ready-made products, but at the same time they are the apotheosis of consumerism and an ideal workforce for contemporary Japanese capitalism. They are the children of the media.*

In its earlier days, Mediamatic concerned itself with coverage and comment on the video art scene in Europe. It has developed, however, beyond 'Art' to include a much more enriching field of thought. Recent theme issues have included *No Panic*, *Monsters* and *Old Media*. In the former, theorists of the Panic condition, **Arthur** and **Marilouie Kroker** are contributors: an appropriate theme that may be freely interpreted in the context of Mediamatic's content. A random flick through back issues will uncover topics as wide-ranging as the phenomenology of Media, sexuality, advertising, architecture, biology and a whole bag of art-culture-philosophical excursions combined to give it an 'ultra-modern' appearance.

Although sometimes obscure and self-indulgent, Mediamatic is a challenging forum for a recurring stable of writers who may find difficulty finding other outlets in which to test and express their ideas. As such, the paradox of such experimentation is that it does not do much to destroy the notion of theory being the preserve of an elite or in cutting across the expectations of its constructed readership. But it's a lavish and well-produced magazine whose content is reflected in the hardware it utilises in its design. There are no U.K. parallels - except perhaps the newly relaunched **Ten 8**, which at least has the look - but Mediamatic does have its complimentary Dutch publication in **Perspektief** dedicated to photography and digital image-making.

Mediamatic represents the high end of publications dealing with media and few magazines are as adventurous. But even if it is a magazine for aficionado's, its back catalogue is a collectors item, if not for the contents then for its 'status as an object'. A cocktail of ideas in the frosted coffee-table of present theory. *Like Real!*

Malcolm Dickson





# Report

## RETINA

**N**o less than eight films and videos made through *Glasgow Film and Video Workshop* were screened at the **Retina '91 International Experimental Film and Video Festival** in Hungary last November. Two members of GFVW (Pauline Law and Stephen Hurrell) received funding from the Scottish Arts Council and the Prince's Trust to represent and promote GFVW at this festival and make contacts for future exchange programmes.

The sleepy little town of Szeged seemed like the unlikely setting for an international festival (try imagining an international experimental film festival in Inverary), but the white painted houses assured us we were in the right place. The need for greater decentralisation of artistic activity/support is a policy that, no doubt, artists in the Scottish provinces would agree with; at Retina, however, this seemed to result in disappointing exclusions, with no work being screened by the more celebrated film/video makers from Budapest, who were also conspicuously absent from the festival. On the other hand, speaking to people in Budapest after the event, very few seemed to know or care that it had taken place.

While the Hungarian presence may have been disappointing, the festival is undoubtedly held in high regard on the international front. This is only the second time it has taken place (the first being in 1989), with the aim of organising Retina biennially. Countries represented not only on the screen but also by film/video makers present included Germany, Holland, Denmark, Italy, France, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Poland, Israel and Japan. All

guests were greeted with traditional small town hospitality - from the opening Mayor's speech to the school dinner staff who worked the weekend to provide lunches. Everyone was given free accommodation in the local hotel and all screenings took place in the town's music college with its makeshift cafe. The small scale setting was perfect for encouraging discussion and making contacts and achieved an intimacy never present at big city festivals.

Programmes in general were compiled in 'packages' from the various countries. While not wishing to suggest a recognisable, homogenous style within each country's programme, this was a useful device for comparing approaches and techniques. The main complaint was that pro-

grammes were far too long, a common problem for festival organisers. There seems to be some idea that unless a programme is feature film length (i.e., 2 hours long) then the viewer somehow isn't getting value for money. It is unfair to pack 16 shorts into one screening - each work demands a high level of concentration which always begins to drift around the eighth or ninth film. Obviously within festivals there is limited time to show a vast array of work but *Retina* would possibly have profited if the organisers had been somewhat more selective. Much of the work from *Video Kunst and Multimedia* in Berlin was clearly influenced by the city's strong tradition of performance and experimental theatre. Video, however, was not used simply to document but became a significant element of the performance through detailing close-ups, slow motion, montage and other post-production techniques. In *Immersion* by Hartmut Jahn the camera follows the performer/percussionist around the interior of a swimming pool as she plays the various surfaces. Other locations such as a demolished building site and a disused quarry were likewise used by other video-makers as environments for performers to interact with.

Within the same programme was the popular *Kawataurus* by Monike Funke Stern, which can only be described as a kitsch-erotic fantasy joy-ride into oblivion with speed-metal and heavy breathing soundtrack. Knut Gervers's *Slaves of Inheritance* was more serious in its exploration of the German psyche through juxtaposing images. Overall this was an energetic and theatrical programme - in using video, performance art has a new domain to



Knut Gervers: *Slaves of Inheritance*





explore; experimentation with the medium of video itself seemed less of an issue.

In contrast, the Japanese programme presented a feeling of reverence for the medium of film. This was most obviously evident in the programme *Mourning for Ektachrome 160* by Eleven Film-makers making reference to the announcement that this high speed film would cease to be sold in Japan after March 1990: *Jonas Mekas once said 'Japanese experimental films are wonderful, but not so much as Chinese noodles in Hakata'. Today may be the last day to be able to shoot this noodle vendor in Super 8. With my eulogy to Ektachrome 160, I will taste these noodles* (Itaru Kato).

The main Japanese programme consisted largely of 8mm productions. Itaru Kato in the past *wondered what it would be like if a pistol bullet had an eye... what kind of sight its line of vision would be able to capture*. This of course became a reality in the Gulf War as cameras positioned on missile heads relayed the image of the chosen target to the point of explosion. In *Sparkling*, a recurring image is a glass of white wine placed in front of television screen. News items and replays of the days strategic bombings are shown on the screen, while the glass becomes a receptor of the information, a fragment of the picture and a distortor of the image - a poignant symbol which questions the events during the Gulf War as they unfold and the information we receive of these events.

Teruo Koike over the last decade has been making a series called *Ecosystems*. *Ecosystems 7* is made up of 270,000 single frame shots taken each day on a beach. The result is a *living* surface on the screen; each second is made up of 24 different yet related images creating an effect of chaotic unity - a time-based Jackson Pollock perhaps. *Ecosystems 5 - A Tremulous Stone* is similar in technique but with the addition of collectors' cards featuring animals and dinosaurs and a powerful soundtrack which had the whole room trembling and the audience plugging their ears as the noise reached almost unbearable levels. The element of time-lapse is particularly relevant to Koike's exploration of the constantly changing environment. His technique challenges the viewer's perceptions of the nature of film and the filming of nature.

The Scottish programme seemed to raise some smiles - perhaps at the quaint old-fashioned reliance on traditional narrative structures in some of the films. The novelty of this was actually very refreshing and whether the audience was surprised or relieved is difficult to

say. Perhaps Scottish filmmakers are still interested in working around narrative simply because they have had insufficient exposure to more experimental forms of independent film making. However, maybe experimenting within these structures is no bad thing as the resulting cinematic qualities were well received.

Overall this festival had an energetic, hectic nature suited to the work being screened and a happy absence of officialdom. Everyone present seemed genuinely interested to see what was being produced in other countries (all screenings were packed out) and in passing on information about the independent scene at home.

This brings us to the attitude towards independent low-budget film and video making in Scotland. There has been a continued emphasis here to create a *Scottish film industry* and a presumption that those working within GFVW, for example, are there as a first step to gaining entry to this industry. The independent low-budget film and video making sector must be given respect, its own resources and support; and this support must not only be directed towards production but to exhibition, for only by being able to view more of this kind of work can we learn and develop our own ideas.

There are many hopeful signs - the new SFC low-budget production grants and the Scottish Arts Council's decision to fund film and video to a greater extent are positive changes in attitude by the main funding bodies; as are the expansion in production, training and membership of GFVW and the success of productions at European festivals and the increasing audiences for low-budget work with sell out screenings organised by GFVW and at last year's Edinburgh Fringe Film and Video Festival and the launch this year of Glasgow's own international festival *New Visions*. Perhaps Scotland is beginning to catch up with the rest of Europe.

**STEPHEN HURREL AND PAULINE LAW**

## BP EXPO

Riverside Studios,  
London, January 1992

In four years, the *BP Expo Festival of New Short Films* has grown to almost unrecognisable proportions. The festival opened far away from the public domain, with a high profile award ceremony at the BAFTA centre in London, graced by HRH Prince Edward, who presented the awards, and was attended by the relevant glitterati. The Festival was backed

by big names including British Petroleum, BBC and Channel 4, and took in films from Australia, Estonia, Poland and the United States. Held in the informal environment of the Riverside Studios, London, in February *The Pick of the BP Expo '92* then toured regionally to venues in Glasgow, Wolverhampton and Belfast.

Despite its high profile and prestigious list of sponsors, the festival by no means enjoyed an abundance of funds and this was, I felt, reflected in the programming bias towards bums on seats. *BP Expo*, originally set up to provide a platform for student-only work, this year extended its brief to include *any films made under a restricted budget*. Most certainly the festival did provide this platform. There were approximately 76 screenings and seminars, all of which were very well attended by diverse audiences and were intentionally structured to attract as wide an audience as possible. The daytime screenings covered a diverse selection of films while the evening performances consisted of mainstream feature films, presented by more well-known film-makers introducing their work. Evidence of high attendance figures could be witnessed in the open plan bar/cafe/foyer area of Riverside which was continually buzzing with people.

The night before the close of the festival, British film-maker **Ken Loach** provided an illustrated talk followed by a screening of his latest film *Riff-Raff*. In a regrettably short interchange of questions and answers with the audience, Loach was asked how he felt when continually denied recognition, working in a crippled British film industry. After nearly 30 years of experience in film, Loach replied *'The problem is not with the funders, it is with the distributors'*. Although Loach was referring more specifically to mainstream film-making, his response made me think of its implication in a wider context of film and video production showcased at *BP Expo*.

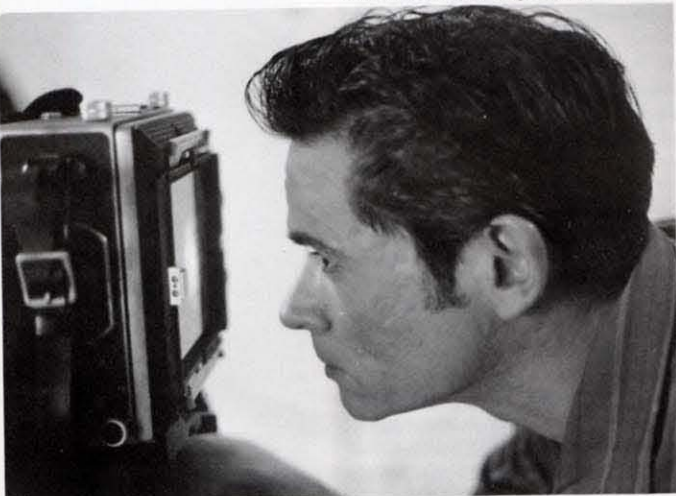




- funding does not come without recognition. *BP Expo* provides an invaluable platform for showing and looking at *restricted budget* films of remarkable diversity and talent.

With the wider scope of work included in this year's festival, any detriment lay not with the inclusion of differing classes of genre, but instead within the organisation of the programme structures, which tended to prioritise box office sales. Important programmes occasionally clashed. This was perhaps inevitable, due to the large amount of work being included, although some clashes, I felt, could have been avoided, for example, the concurrent screening of *Black to Black*, *Experimental* and Polish programmes with a seminar on funding. There was a videotape, not greatly used, constantly available for viewing work, which failed to accommodate work existing only on film. The festival was admirable in the scale and range of work it took on, although programme organisation tended to neglect the audience and to marginalise those areas of production which struggle most, ironically those areas for which the festival was originally established.

Constantine Giannaris: Caught Looking



A mere 10% of the total schedule was covered by experimental screenings. These were unimaginatively titled, giving no real indication of the content of the programmes and grouping them rather unattractively, apart from the rest of the festival categories. Many of the films from the more commercially aimed programmes reflected a generic cross-over between the avant-garde/mainstream/commercial practice that is inherent in the wider context of UK film and television practice (at a significantly accelerating pace). However, there was no attempt to analyse these conflicting influences in the programming structures, which would perhaps have made the overall selections not only more interesting but more informative.

Experimental work which was lumped together - and as a result proved, at times, difficult to watch - often compensated for technical limitations through challenging content. Exploring the female body as a site of representation and preoccupation is concentrated on in **Melanie Styles's** *Thrash*, which wittily presents a pose of feminine glamour only to throw us off guard, manipulating texture and speed with a very physical use of the camera. **Cathy Sharp's** *What the Butler Saw* literally re-positions the female body in the text frame of the old silent movies. The figure undresses, but as she does so becomes increasingly out of focus, thus displacing *desire* of the male gaze and demanding a re-dress of the female image, both in historical and contemporary contexts. *Came Tumbling Down* by the same artist follows a silken dressed woman, silently tumbling across the film frames in a surreal, deconstruction of the film form which again expresses the desire to escape entrapment and stereotyping of the *female image*. Where these pieces exploit the potential of technical limitations to innovative ends, some of the more technically *literate*, were rather the reverse. Using computer graphic techniques **Gavin Maxwell** conjures up images of bodily distortion in *Experiments with Time and Motion* and *Hall of Mirrors*. For me, these were a series of clever, but superficial images that produced rather empty reflections on computer graphic techniques. **Tony Hill's** *Expanded Movie* plays with optically squashed and squeezed images. Hill's subjects are sites of the comfortable: familiar domestic, urban and countryside scenes which are treated through elongation and contraction of ridiculous proportions. Hill's priority is primarily, it seems, to entertain. However, I find his technologically distorted perceptions of people and objects unsettling if they are intended as empty jests.

**Constantine Giannaris** transports us into the future where he sits at an editing machine and plays 'virtual sex' - embarking on a voyeuristic journey through time in search of 'true love'. *Caught Looking* employs a multiplicity of video, film and computer techniques and is a montaged reconstruction of the stereotypical gay man from the clichés of cinema right through to today's media. Promises of love are jarringly interrupted by the codes of the games and the obstructions of technology. When the game is over the player sits alone without his prize. *Caught Looking* is a humorous and thought provoking piece which deserves a second glance.

**Jamie Thraves's** films are eccentric, surreal essays on physical

and psychological restraints. *Small Orange House* is a nightmarish scenario which evokes sensations of entrapment and frustration in the face of unseen forces, while *Scratch* is a black comedy about breakdowns in family relations and domestic claustrophobia. The erratic cinematography, the cruelty of the humour and the unguarded violent expression are elements Thraves combines in his work to produce films that are individualistic and extremely powerful.

**Sarah Turner's** films powerfully juxtapose sound, image and narration creating a sense of ambiguity that is provocative, humorous and unnerving. In *One and Another Time*, three images are intercut - an abacus swinging violently in the foreframe, light on the ceiling from a passing car and a winter exterior viewed by a rocking motion of the camera. The rhythmic intervals of the images create space for the narrator's voice, which weaves a plot of intimacy and violence subtly around them. *A Tale Part Told* focusses on the shadow cast by a rapidly spinning bicycle wheel, its momentum maintained by a drum-tumble sound accompaniment. The tale is metaphorical, playing on notions of independence and dominance in relationship structures. Light textures, image, sound and text are hypnotically interwoven, producing an effect which lingers long after the film's finish.

**Alia Syed's** *Untitled* revolves around the memory of an event recalled in the faces of women travelling on an Underground. Images are superimposed - layers seeming to capture the figures as they disappear and reappear in ghostly transit. English subtitles weave through these *displaced figures*, at times barely legible, and create a dynamism through their lack of conjunction with the Urdu voice over. The piece, if a little long, is powerfully meditative and evokes strong sensations of the fragility of identity and transience of memory.

A theme central to the Experimental programmes at *BP Expo* was new work from Germany, including the work of **Matthias Muller**, whose intensely personal films are becoming increasingly influential in Germany. In *Flamethrowers* (made collaboratively with AlteKinder and Schmelztzahn collectives) and *Epilogue* (with Christiane Heuwinke), acts of aggression are literally carried out on the film celluloid which is burned and scarred and then reprinted and combined with treated, reproduced movie leaders. The images erode and disintegrate before your eyes and the effect is one of cannibalism, an almost ritualistic act of catharsis that appeals for a kind of purity



in the language of film. The images are mesmeric. *Aus Der Ferne - The Memo Book* is Muller's film document of a former friend and lover who died of Aids. Illness, frustration, loneliness, love and loss are built up with an incredible sense of physicality through the editing and treatment of the film. Perhaps because of Muller's art college background and the concentration in his films on his sexuality as a gay man, he is conveniently compared to Derek Jarman. Muller's work, however, remains distinct and individual and may soon enjoy the recognition it deserves here and in Germany.

There was a considerable amount of 'quality' productions from the *Royal College of Art* and the *National Film and Television School*, the majority clearly orientated towards the mainstream market. Programmes of new film from Canada and Australia, which will undoubtedly re-emerge via television or screen, were also received by large audiences. The festival winner for best over-all production was **Andrew Der's** *Siberian Summer* about love fantasies in a Hungarian chicken factory. The film also won an award for best cinematography. Challenging both in cinematic technique and treatment of subject matter, the film seems to exemplify the sort of work that is rarely produced in Britain. A selection of films from the *Lodz Film School* in Poland further emphasised this feeling. Stunningly shot in black and white these poetic meditations on Polish life and culture surpassed anything else I saw in the festival.

On the last day in the videoteque there was a curious entry marked *Installations 12 noon - 5.30pm*. I popped in and out a number of times with great enthusiasm to see how such a thing could be achieved in this short time span and found only a large monitor with some particularly attractive animated *jelly dolphins* floating around on it. These somewhat alleviated my disappointment and were very pleasant to contemplate after the cacophony of sound, image and conversation I had exposed myself to over the previous 7 days. This goldfish bowl was blindingly clear. In an industry so concerned with image and exposure in order to *get on*, *BP Expo* provides an invaluable platform for film makers to display remarkable diversity and talent. But Beware of the Piranhas; funders take note.

EMILY GRANT

## Notes on AVE & Report of Conference

### 'What is the Future of Film & Video Festivals in Europe'?

In November '91, Arnhem, Holland, once again hosted The International Audio Visual Experimental Festival or AVE, as it is more commonly abbreviated. It is a large-scale well-organised independent festival, but no funding logos appear on the Dutch poster in '91. Its aim is to accommodate new artists working in film, video, performance, installation and computer based work and it welcomes projects using more than one medium.

When you arrive the breadth of the festival is overwhelming: the impression is that the team responsible have spent the whole year engaged in achieving the 10 venue spectacle. Remarkably, it's largely operated on a voluntary basis. The work selected is presented in the best way possible, given the time allocated for each artist. There's a turnover of around 60 installations and 34 performances. Close scrutiny finds installation work is generally under-developed and little evidence exists of any artists undertaking site-specific responsibilities. Maybe there's just not enough time or funds. None of the artists included in the '91 festival received any payment, either for travel or for making work.

It's over 7 years old now and unsurprisingly some of the original scouts and programmers' enthusiasm is wearing thin. I don't wish to be negative but have to identify the problems of AVE in order adequately to respond to the conference which was organised.

The conference was a new departure for AVE, and with the addition of a programme of talks, discussion about practice and the work included was ensured. The lecture programme was as follows: **Richard Layzell** from the UK on performance, **Andrew Pepper** from Cologne on holography, **Rebel** from Germany on image alchemy, **De Laet** from Belgium on image and sound, in addition to talks on computer art and media philosophy and media aesthetics by Professor **Mario Costa**.

In appearance the conference was a prestigious affair: coffee and wine were waitress-served and champagne was presented to the eight organisers who represented seven European countries. The discussion was chaired by *Mediamatic's* editor **Geert Lovink**, who began by asking each member of the panel to respond

to the question, 'What is the future of European Film and Video Festivals?' **Christoph Nebel**, an artist who has recently completed a post-graduate degree, attempted to provide a critique of the large European video festivals. He identified *Ars Electronica's* budget as the reason for it failing to respond at a grass roots level with film and tape makers. This theme of funds being the issue which separated the independents from the majors recurred in numerous forms. This could so easily slip into a self-congratulatory or smug mode for the speakers, or simply turn into a slagging off of the majors, implying a separatist ideology. This highlighted the whole problem of the conference, in terms of hindering it from forming any strategies. Why wasn't a representative from a major festival or a funding body invited? A structure existed which actively chose to remain marginal.

**Claes Galis** informed the audience of how he felt that AVE was the best festival, because it supported so many artists. I can sympathise with this but what's lacking at AVE is work which has the clear context which professional work so often provides. This represents a missed opportunity: given the amount of young and new artists present, it would be excellent to offer access to funded and thus developed work. Thus the question linking these two speakers is, how can the independents support artists, projects and utilise their ability to be better informed about the infra-structure of practitioners in a given country?

**Stephen Olry** from *Revue Eclair* (France) described how alternative structures have deteriorated from the early eighties onwards. Projects would start from the squat, now there's a Minister for Culture. His account of the projects which he organises, without funding, were inspiring and had more than an air of elitism, although actively seeking to locate avant-garde work in public spaces. Olry described transient projects which were site-specific in nature, video installations in suburban locations, churches or derelict buildings. You received the impression they might be something you would stumble upon rather than find as a result of a mail shot. From the avant garde not caring about its audience, to an avant garde which was desperate to gain more audiences: **Gabrielle Kahnert** from the Berlin Film Festival concluded that audiences for the annual programme were in decline and that if it persisted perhaps this most famous of the independents would become smaller, or close.

This reflected the diminishing





underground scene as discussed by Stephan Olay. An underground identity needs some funds, and its culture is dependent on being on the outside. If you take as an example how the Dutch Department of Employment is radically rethinking its policy, bringing itself in line with other less liberal European countries, and equate this fact with the diminishing AVE volunteers, then it becomes easy to understand how an underground culture can be squeezed by a changed political situation: the unification of Europe.

**Nik de Jong**, coorganiser at the Oceaen Gallery, told me he had left AVE and had relinquished any curatorial responsibility for the event. For '92, the Oceaen has been offered as a venue within the festival rather than the space being an integral part of the festival's vision. This decision has arisen because of the dissatisfaction with the choice of Scouts, whose composition has tended to include mostly students from the local art institutions (albeit since they are already subsidised). Scouts are offered travel costs and asked to self-finance the rest of the trip.

On a lighter note, **Gabrielle Bacchini** from Turin described the Biennale of Young Artists. The visuals he provided showed it to be a more broad, arts affair, with theatre-based work and music, for example. His enthusiasm for the event was admirable and proposed a collaboration between the festivals in Holland and Italy via their Ministers for Culture. This was the first and only recommendation from the panel. From the floor a more collective response was proposed, a consortium of 'Independents' to meet with the task of raising revenue from European funding initiatives. The EC 'Kaleidoscope' funding programme, for example, successor to the 'Platform Europe' award scheme, invites projects from three member countries. Undertaking co-fundraising would also mean defining what the festivals are and answer the question which hallmarks all funding applications: who is their audience? This would ensure that independent festivals are as significant to the culture of Europe as opera, ballet or whatever, although it might not be that easy.

As a recommendation, I person-

ally proposed that the independents individually needed to assess their role in relationship to the majors and thus to the art world or relevant industries for that matter how can a relationship - otherwise be developed and thus credibility with existing funders established? Is the role of the independents to establish a new generation of video, film, installation, and performance artists for the majors to promote?

An additional recommendation was to assess the possibility of each festival selecting work from its own country, thereby exemplifying the grass roots quality of independent festivals, and touring this work to venues and countries in the proposed consortium. This would save R & D funds and provide a high quality programme of work, it is unforgivable that AVE Scouts have still not visited Belfast, Derry or Dublin. This year I understand they failed to get to explore much of Scotland since their funds exhausted themselves, resulting from spending more time in Leicester, Liverpool and Leeds.

**ALAN McLEAN**

*Balliol College, St John's College  
and Museum of Modern Art*

**Helen Escobedo**

*Site-specific sculptures*

Helen Escobedo presented in association with  
Visiting Arts and The Ruskin School  
Projects funded by The British Council and  
Southern Arts

*The Pitt Rivers Museum*

**Snares of privacy and fiction**

*Objects, images, soundworks and texts  
within an ethnological museum collection  
by contemporary artists, musicians and  
writers*

Sutupa Biswas  
Adam Bohman & Nick Couldry  
Chris Dorsett  
Max Eastley  
Per Hüttner  
Jamie McKendrick  
Elizabeth Rosser

*For details contact:*  
Artweek Office, Unit 1, St John Fisher School  
Sandy Lane West, Oxford OX4 5LD  
Telephone 0865 748328

artweek  
16-31 MAY 1992





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